銃皇無尽のファフニール

セルリアン・エンゲージ

IX

ツカサ

Illustration

梱枝りこ

「んっ……」
深月がびくりと体を震わせ、
小さな喘ぎを漏らす。
その瞬間、竜紋から
蒼い光が溢れて
深月の全身を包み込んだ。
「っ――くっ……ああっ!!」
自分の体を抱きしめて、
深月は呻く。
物部深月
Mitsuki Mononobe

「んっ――いいのよ……好きにしても」
熱っぽい吐息を零し、キーリは
潤んだ瞳で俺を見つめた。
空白になった思考が、
本能から湧き上がる衝動に呑み込まれていく。
「愛し合いましょう、悠。
私たちの未来を守るために」
キーリ・スルト・ムスペルヘイム
Kili Surtr Muspellzheimr

「アリエラ？　一体何を……」
行動の意図が分からず、俺は疑問の声を上げた。
けれどアリエラは何も答えず、手にしたリボンをじっと見つめた後、
ゆっくりと指を解く。はらりと舞い落ちる緑色のリボン。
だが、そのリボンが地面へ着く前にアリエラは口を開いた。
「――届けて」
彼女の架空武装から風が吹き、舞い上がったリボンが俺の方へと飛んでくる。
反射的に俺がリボンを掴むと、アリエラは小さく微笑んだ。
アリエラ・ルー
Ariella Lu

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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Unlimited Fafnir Volume 09

Prologue

The lush and green scenery flashed by outside the window.

The two of us were sitting in a car during a bumpy ride along a mountain road, looking forward to our destination.

"—Hey, hey, Yuu-kun. Are we still going to catch fish this year?"

Asking me with irrepressible joy was Mitsuki, my childhood friend. With her beloved straw hat on her lap, her eyes were glimmering with anticipation.

"You're so weak, Mitsuki, so that's probably not happening—Well, for me, it'll be a piece of cake."

Listening to Yuu brag, Mitsuki pouted unhappily.

"I'm not weak! I'm not going to lose to you, Yuu-kun!"

Mitsuki clenched her tiny fist and retorted.

"Really? Then let's make it a contest."

"Yes!"

For some reason, Mitsuki nodded very happily even though we were clearly competing against each other. The sight of her smiling face put me at a loss what to do.

"No cheating. Catch them with your hand."

Feeling too embarrassed to look Mitsuki in the eye, I turned my gaze away from her.

Mitsuki's parents were sitting in the driver's and front passenger seats.

I had gone camping with Mitsuki's family the previous year too. The location was on the bank of a river with lovely scenery. Since the river water had been unbelievably clear and transparent, Mitsuki and I had competed to see who could catch the most fish barehanded.

Last year, neither of us caught any, so it was a draw, but I was very confident this time. I won't lose to Mitsuki no matter what, I secretly vowed in my heart. From between the seats in the car, I looked ahead of the car.

There were many turns because it was a mountain road. One side of the road was a cliff and provided a good view of the scenery. Upstream of the river, currently on the left side, was our destination.

However—this scenery was instantly interrupted.

My view went pitch black.

"Huh...?"

I thought we had entered a tunnel, but no. That was not it. There had not been a tunnel ahead of us.

Inside darkness where I could not even see my own hand, I heard the terrified screams of Mitsuki's parents.

The screeching of brakes resounded. The safety belt dug into my body, hurting a lot.

"Kyahhhhhhhh!?"

Then I heard Mitsuki's scream.

While I could see nothing and had no idea what was going on, I felt a great impact. The world spun around.

"Mitsuki!"

Although I had lost all sense of direction, I desperately reached out to her—

"Ah..."

I opened my eyes to see a tall ceiling before me.

I was lying on a soft bed, reaching out towards a glamorous chandelier.

For a moment, I was unsure where I was.

Neither in the car nor in the darkness.

This was neither my home at Nanato City, a NIFL military camp, nor Mitsuki's dorm.

"—What's the matter? Did you have a nightmare?"

But as soon as I heard the voice coming from the side, I instantly realized where I was.

I turned my gaze towards the source of the voice and looked at the golden fairy standing by the bed.

"Principal..."

It was Midgard's chief administrator, whose slender and petite figure meant that one could mistake her for a young child at first glance—

Charlotte B. Lord.

She was dressed in nothing more than a white camisole and shorts, an unseemly sight. She was gazing down at me—But her face was dark.

"Isn't that wrong? Correct yourself."

"……?"

Wondering with my mind that had just woken up, I realized my error.

"—Sorry, Charl. Good morning."

I had promised to address her as a "friend" whenever the two of us were alone. Polite language was forbidden.

"Yes, that's more like it. What a pleasant morning, my friend."

Nodding contentedly, the principal stroked my head.

"By the way... Could you please put on some clothes? No—Get dressed."

Feeling embarrassed because she was rubbing my head and because she was standing before me in underwear, I hastily looked away.

"Why? This is my room where no one will see me, so don't worry."

"But I'm here right now."

I sat up in bed and turned my back to her to keep her out of my sight.

"What are you talking about by this point? Aren't we in a relationship where we stayed up late at night, engaged in passion and intensity, before going to bed in the same room?"

"...Stop using such a misleading description! We played games until late then fell asleep, that's all."

I sighed and looked around. On the clock tower's top floor, this room was located even deeper than the principal's office. It was stuffed full of the principal's personal belongings.

An unruly selection of souvenirs from various countries all over the world were arranged by the wall with a giant safe in a corner. In front of the bed was a giant monitor with a number of game consoles in front of it.

I had spent the previous night with her, serving as her opponent for games delivered from Japan. Incidentally, the previous day was chess and the day before that was Japanese chess.

For the past three days since returning to Midgard, I had not stepped out of this room.

"Well excuse me. I only went to bed after confirming very carefully that you had fallen asleep. I am your surveillant, after all, and can't slack off."

Listening to the principal behind me, I shrugged.

Indeed—She was the one in charge of monitoring me while I was under *house arrest*. During the journey back to Midgard, I found out about the change in color of the dragon marks belonging to Mitsuki and the other

girls and that I was forbidden from coming into contact with them and other Ds.

Consequently, I could no longer live at Mitsuki's dorm. Instead, I was quarantined in Charl's personal bedroom—

"All I see you doing is play every day without doing anything resembling work."

"I play with you because I was afraid you'd get bored. I don't play with you nonstop because I want to use you as an excuse to get away from bothersome work!"

"That sounds more like the truth to me..."

I smiled wryly and replied. At the same time, another voice concurred with me.

"I believe so too, Charlotte-sama."

"Uh... M-Maika!?"

The extremely displeased voice made the principal crawled onto the bed and hide behind my back.

I looked to the entrance in surprise. Standing there was the principal's secretary, Maika Stuart-san.

She had appeared without me noticing when at all. Sure enough, she must be no ordinary person, I praised with amazement in my mind.

"Work has piled up since you have neglected your responsibilities for three days. I shall take over the task of supervising him. Charlotte-sama, please return to your original post immediately."

"D-Don't come over! This takes priority over all other work!"

Saying that, the principal wrapped herself around me tightly from behind.

"Stop it—I-It's very uncomfortable."

With her arm around my neck, I had trouble breathing. The sensation of tender skin behind underwear was transmitting through. I could feel my face burning up.

"My friend! I'm currently facing a crisis! Now is the time for us to join forces and vanquish the evil overlord with the power of friendship!"

"Who is the evil overlord, may I ask?"

Maika-san's eyebrow twitched as she forcibly peeled the principal off me.

"U-Unhand me! I don't wanna work! I still want to play with my friend!"

"...You finally confess your true feelings. If you continue to act willfully, I shall spank you as I did in the past."

"Wha... Will you subject to such an embarrassment in front of my friend!?"

Maika's threat made the principal's expression change completely. She finally settled down.

—In the past. So that meant Maika-san had been looking after Charl since childhood?

Despite their roles as master and subordinate, their positions were reversed at times probably because of that.

However, the principal was an immortal dragon of indeterminate age—the "Gray" Vampire.

Knowing the principal's "past," it meant that Maika-san's age could not be judged by appearance either.

"Well then, please get changed quickly and return to work."

"Mumumu... No helping it."

Dropped by Maika-san on the floor, the principal picked up the red one-piece dress that had fallen by the bedside and put on the lab coat that was draped on chair.

"I'll get my work done immediately and come back. My friend, wait for me!"

Then with a flutter of her lab coat's hem, the principal ran out of the room.

"If only she had that level of motivation at all times..."

Maika-san sighed deeply then bowed her head at me.

"Thank you for keeping Charlotte-sama company. You must be tired, right?"

"I'm fine—but definitely sleep deprived... Thanks to the principal, I'm a bit dizzy right now."

Getting off the bed, I explained how I felt honestly. Playing until I fell asleep last night, I was still in uniform. Still drowsy, my head felt a bit heavy with some dizziness.

I probably would feel differently if I were isolated in an underground shelter instead.

"I am terribly sorry if you feel stifled with your freedom restricted."

Maika-san bowed her head again but I shook my head and told her not to worry.

"What I did... and there's Mitsuki and the others' situation... I know things are serious. Keeping me isolated is only natural."

Asgard had kept the "Purple" Kraken's remains preserved in a lab. Born from that was a second-generation dragon—Kraken Zwei. Considered Shinomiya Miyako's daughter, she possessed superior combat strength and even the ability to mark all Ds.

Even the fangs of "Fafnir" were powerless against her, a dragon. Iris used the Basilisk's power to fight her, but still ended up defeated.

And upon seeing Iris about to be turned into Kraken Zwei's mate before my eyes, I emitted a powerful wish refusing to let her be taken away.

The result was that in addition to Iris, the dragon marks of Kraken Zwei, as well as the girls not present at the scene, all changed color.

"Please do not make such an expression. You have not committed any crimes. Rather, you brought about the best-case scenario."

The best-case scenario... Indeed, that might be the case judging from the current situation.

Having become the Basilisk's successor, Iris had turned back to human because of contact with me. Kraken Zwei had lost her mithril hair, regained her sanity, thus allowing her to live on as a human.

But having turned into "my kind," were they really human? I had no idea. Having marked Ds as mates, could I still be considered a human existence? This point was rather contentious. It was also unknown what effects this transformation would have on their bodies.

As a result, I was under house arrest and barred from contact with Mitsuki and the others whose dragon marked had changed color. This could not be helped.

"How are they?"

I asked Maika-san because I wanted to know how Iris and the others were doing. Since the principal had been playing games with me for days on end, I had no chance to find out the current state of affairs.

I wanted to call them directly but did not have a portable terminal. Rather than confiscated, it had been damaged during the intense battle against Kraken Zwei and was now under repairs. I had three broken ribs myself with fractures all over the body, so the terminal breaking was only to be expected.

The heavy injuries would normally take at least three months to heal but right now, I had recovered to the point that I did not even need bandages. This was thanks to the "Gray" Vampire's powers. Using her own bodily fluids as a medium, the principal was able to bestow others with a super powerful healing factor.

"Currently, the students of Brynhildr Class and those who came along with them from Japan are all living in Mitsuki-san's dormitory."

I was surprised to hear Maika-san's reply.

"All of them? I thought Iris and Lisa would be living in their own dorms..."

"Because Lisa-san, Firill-san, Ren-san, Ariella-san and Tia-san all have dragon marks that have changed color and would cause a commotion among other students if seen. The color change in Iris-san's dragon mark has subsided but considering that she still needs to be kept under close observation, she was asked to move as well."

Speaking of which, that was only natural.

Under the current circumstances, my classmates could not live together with ordinary students. If dragon marks with color changes were to be seen, it would plunge Midgard into chaos.

"The four of them, Kili Surtr Muspelheim-san, Jeanne Hortensia-san, 'Black' Vritra and Kraken Zwei, are all in very special positions. Placing them to live in Mitsuki-san's dormitory is probably the best solution."

"Are Kili and Kraken Zwei... behaving?"

I asked about the two who worried me the most.

Tia was able to seal away Vritra's powers but Kili was under no restraints. Kraken Zwei was very close with Jeanne but without seeing the actual situation, I still felt worried.

"Yes. No particularly large disturbances have been reported to me. However, Kili-san demands strongly to see you... Right now, she is still following instructions. Oh, but—"

Maika-san stopped mid-sentence as though she had suddenly remembered something.

Something must have happened after all. I urged her to tell me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... I simply recalled an intense debate that had taken place between them."

"Debate? What on earth...?"

As one might expect, were the girls talking about me, the one who had marked them? However, Maika-san's answer was completely unexpected.

"It was regarding Kraken Zwei's name."

"Name...?"

What the heck? I frowned.

"She has lost a dragon's constitution and become virtually no different from an ordinary D. Hence, the plan is to officially accept her as a Midgard student... Accordingly, Haruka suggested naming her properly."

"That's true... The name of Kraken Zwei is already quite inappropriate."

To Haruka—Shinomiya-sensei—Kraken Zwei was the orphaned child of her younger sister's. It was quite understandable that she would want to give Kraken Zwei a more human-sounding name.

"Yes. However, everyone is already calling her 'Zwei' based on her Kraken designation and she already considers it her name. The girls were debating the pros and cons of giving her a new name now..."

Nodding, Maika-san showed a troubled expression.

"Haruka has been thinking hard every day, trying to find a name that the child would like apart from 'Zwei.' If you possible, you should help too."

"—I'll try to think of something."

I nodded at Maika-san and felt relieved.

Rather than feeling afraid or lost because of the current situation, the girls were troubling over Kraken Zwei's future instead. Their outlook was cast towards the future.

In that case, I had to contemplate seriously about the future even more.

Was it reacting to Mitsuki and the others? The tiny dragon mark on my left hand became faintly blue.

I must not let this color bring misfortune to them, I prayed sincerely in my heart.

*

A military force of steel was currently advancing along the vast blue sea.

This was a fleet of cruisers and aircraft carriers held under NIFL. Inside the office of the flagship, Naglfar, a man commented in mockery.

"—Deception eh."

The man, Loki Jotunheim, was currently looking at a terminal screen with his lips twisted.

Displayed was a status report issued to the outside world by the international organization leading dragon policies, Asgard, regarding various dragons distributed across the world.

The purple dragon—"Purple" Kraken... Exterminated in Midgard's territorial waters.

The white dragon—"White" Leviathan... Exterminated in Midgard's territorial waters.

The red dragon—"Red" Basilisk... Exterminated during a joint operation with NIFL.

The yellow dragon—"Yellow" Hraesvelgr... Exterminated in the Principality of Erlia.

The green dragon—"Green" Yggdrasil... Exterminated in Japan.

The blue dragon—"Blue" Hekatonkheir... Disappeared after self-destructing with Yggdrasil.

The black dragon—"Black" Vritra... Appeared in the air above a NIFL base, repelled by Ds. Deemed exterminated.

Just looking at this report, one would think that all seven dragons threatening the world had disappeared.

However, Loki knew that this was not the truth.

The Yggdrasil that had appeared at Mount Fuji's sea of trees was wrecked and had gone silent... But life signs had not ceased. In addition, Loki had received reports about Ds inheriting the various dragons' powers.

As for the Kraken, its juvenile form had escaped from the lab. Currently, it appeared that Midgard had taken care of it. As for the extermination of Vritra, there were a number of inexplicable questions too.

And ultimately, there was still one dragon existing in this world, ruling over human society.

"The gray dragon... 'Gray' Vampire. Charlotte B. Lord."

Loki spoke her name with resentment.

One could say that as Midgard's chief administrator, she had gathered on her palm all the dragon powers inherited by the Ds.

Currently, she was not an enemy. Except to Loki himself and a certain "him"—

The screen on the terminal changed. Loki had switched it to a young man's picture.

Displayed was his face when he had defeated Hreidmar. Genuine "killing intent towards humans" resided in his eyes.

Looking at that face, Loki smiled contentedly and said:

"Come, 'Gray,' now is the time for a rematch. I reject your existence."

Chapter 1 - Blue Stigma

Part 1

The fifth day of my life in confinement.

Today, the principal was working in the adjacent office, separated by a door, with Maika-san substituting in the role of supervising me.

While feeling Maika-san's gaze, I silently did push-ups next to the window.

Initially, I chatted with her about many things, but after she told me not to restrict my activities, I started using this time for physical training.

I was playing games the whole time when the principal were here, so my body had become sluggish.

"Hoo..."

After one round of daily training, I stood up. Coincidentally, there was a bell ringing outside.

Through a large window in the room overlooking the school, I saw students leaving the academic buildings. Until recently, this had been my daily life, but at the moment, I could not return to it yet.

Feeling frustrated about this boring life, I sighed.

Then I heard a sound indicating the melody of an incoming call on a terminal.

I looked back to see Maika-san taking a portable terminal out from her maid uniform's pocket and bringing it against her ear.

"—Yes, I understand. I shall pass the message along."

After a simple exchange, Maika-san looked at me.

"Mononobe-san, a certain person has arrived today, requesting to meet you face to face."

"Meeting me face to face? Is that okay when I'm still in isolation?"

Feeling quite perplexed by the sudden notice, I replied but she nodded.

"This young lady has made contact with you previously and the color change in her dragon mark had vanished. No anomalies have been found despite daily examinations, hence we have agreed to let her go out and meet you."

"That's..."

The only girls who matched those criteria were Iris and Kraken Zwei, but the latter would not be coming to see me alone. In other words—

I excitedly waited for her arrival.

"....."

After a while, Maika-san seemed to notice something and moved away from the entrance. Immediately, the door was flung open vigorously.

"Mononobe!"

Calling my name, a silver-haired girl—Iris Freyja—rushed into the room. She was my classmate in Brynhildr Class as well as a D whom I had marked when I had refused to allow anyone to take her away.

After seeing me, a red flush appeared on her pale skin as she dashed towards me. However—

"Ah!?"

She tripped on a game controller the principal had tossed out there, resulting in a great fall forwards.

"Iris, are you okay?"

I hastily ran over to her and helped her up.

"Ow... My forehead, I bumped it..."

Iris was holding her forehead while tears appeared in her eyes. However, she instantly clasped my hands with happiness written all over her face.

"Mononobe! It's you, Mononobe! I finally get to see you..."

Seeing Iris make such a joyful face, my heart began to race.

It had been quite a while since I last heard this voice of hers.

"It's only been five days, right? You're exaggerating too much."

Too embarrassed to show so much happiness like Iris, I feigned calmness.

"I'm not exaggerating! They won't let me see you no matter how much I begged... No calls or emails allowed and I had no idea where you were... I was worried sick!"

With a slightly angry look, Iris approached me.

"Uh..."

With Iris' face so close that we could feel each other's breaths, I felt quite flustered. Noticing this fact, Iris also blushed intensely.

"Oh—S-Sorry. It's clearly not your fault, Mononobe..."

Iris frantically separated from me and apologized.

"No—I should be the one to apologize. I didn't consider your feelings. To be honest, Iris, I'm very happy to see you too."

"Mononobe..."

With shyness and embarrassment, Iris and I gazed at each other.

Suddenly, a deliberate sounding cough could be heard from the doorway.

"—I shall be waiting outside the room. In light of Mononobe-san's situation, I shall lock the door from outside. When you wish to leave, Iris-san, please knock to let me know."

Saying that, Maika-san left the room.

Left behind, Iris and I looked at each and smiled wryly.

"She's being considerate in an unusual area. Anyway, I'm very happy we can chat together, just the two of us."

Saying that, Iris leaned towards me, then starting sniffing as though she noticed a smell.

"Mononobe, you seem like you have a sweaty smell? Have you been bathing properly?"

"Oh, that's because I was training just now. There's a bathroom here so I do take baths every day. But since it's bothering you, I'll hurry and take a bath now."

Noticing my shirt was drenched with sweat, I replied but Iris hastily shook her head.

"I-It's okay! I don't mind... I don't dislike your smell, Mononobe. Also, it's a rare chance for us to meet, so don't worry! Oh, but—"

She stopped halfway, apparently thinking of something.

"What's the matter?"

I asked, but for some reason, Iris went red and started acting shy.

"U-Umm... I thought of one way to not waste time. Umm... We could b-bathe together, you know?"

"Uh..."

Faced with this sudden suggestion, I gasped in shock. Then Iris clenched her fist and leaned forward with an expression intending to cast away all hesitation.

"Yes, it's a great idea! Just like last time, I'll scrub your back for you! T-The bathroom is that way, right!?"

Iris kept talking on her own without waiting for my answer, then dragged me by the arm.

"H-Hey!"

I yelled frantically, causing Iris to stop in front of the bathroom door, looking back uneasily.

"Mononobe... You don't want to?"

"It's not that I don't want to, but—"

"Thank goodness..."

She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled with joy. While I was involuntarily mesmerized by her face, she already brought me into the changing area.

"Then you undress first, Mononobe. I'll cover my eyes."

Covering her eyes with both hands, Iris urged.

The changing area was quite small and could only hold two people. In response to her demand for me to undress in front of her, I stood there motionlessly.

—What the heck was she thinking of doing?

For the past while, Iris had been keeping her distance from me out of consideration for Mitsuki. In that case, why was she...

"Mononobe, what's wrong? Hurry up."

"I-I'm on it..."

Intimidated by her vigor, I began to take off my shirt despite my doubts.

"Hyawah!?"

However, Iris suddenly cried out, causing me to stop.

"Iris, you saw, right?"

"I-I didn't see! I didn't peek!"

Obviously peeking at me between her fingers, Iris shook her head.

I was slightly relieved to see Iris acting the same as usual.

Sure enough, it was quite bad for me to be taking a bath together with Iris in the principal's room while under house arrest. Perhaps the principal or Maika-san might come over to check on us. However, if I refused Iris at this point, she would definitely be sad. Weighing common sense against Iris on a balance, I made my decision decisively.

"Turn around."

I grabbed Iris' shoulders and spun her around. Then I swiftly undressed and wrapped a bath towel around my waist.

Anyway, I must not make Iris sad.

If scolded, I will be the one to apologize, it's decided—After warning myself to keep things within defensible bounds when questioned afterwards, I tapped Iris on the shoulder.

"I'm ready. I'll go in first."

"Y-Yes! I'll come in right away. Wait for me, Mononobe."

Turned away, Iris answered slightly nervously.

"Okay."

I nodded, entered the bathroom and closed the door. As expected of the principal's personal room, the bathroom was very spacious and luxurious.

The floor and walls were all made of marble while the bath water was drawn up from a natural hot spring deep in Midgard's underground. Although I had used it many times already, I still felt envious about this facility from the bottom of my heart.

In any case, I turned on the faucet, adjusted the temperature and waited for Iris to enter.

—I recalled what had happened with the Leviathan battle.

Just now, Iris had also mentioned "like last time."

It had happened almost half a year ago. Due to Iris getting marked by Leviathan and I was serving as her bodyguard, we were in the underground shelter. On that occasion, Iris had entered the bathroom to wash my back in an attempt to reward me.

Iris had screamed despite being clearly the one who was barging into the bathroom, making me quite upset.

I smiled wryly as I recalled those memories. Suddenly, I heard the bathroom door opening.

"M-Mononobe, I'm coming in."

Wrapped in a bath towel, Iris entered the bathroom stiffly. She had clearly not entered the water yet, but her face was already bright red.

"You don't have to force yourself if you feel that embarrassed, you know?"

I asked in worry but Iris frantically shook her head.

"I-I'm not forcing myself! It's true I'm embarrassed... But I do this willingly."

Her brave voice sounded like she was encouraging herself. Then she took the shower head from me.

"Okay, Mononobe, I'm going to scrub now."

"O-Okay."

Intimidated by Iris' vigor, I nodded. Iris came behind me while I was sitting on a stool then used the shower head to pour water. The warm water felt very comfortable on my back.

But the sudden touch of Iris' hand there made my heart pound nervously.

"So... your wounds are already healed. Although I heard you were saved with the principal and Shinomiya-sensei's help... It's still quite amazing to see with my own eyes."

Looking at where I had been heavily injured in the fight against Kraken Zwei, Iris touched my back and whispered. She applied body wash with her hands and it felt very good.

"So Shinomiya-sensei told all of you about the principal?"

"Yeah. Because you already told us the news of Shinomiya-sensei's death, Mononobe. We wouldn't accept anything but a proper explanation."

Replying with a wry smile, Iris touched the scars on my back with her fingertips.

"The principal's powers are so surprising... But scars are still left behind."

"Well... It only speeds up recovery rather than make the wounds go away. It can't be fully restored back to what it looked like."

Iris applied more force through her hands after I replied.

"That's true—it can't be fully restored. Although I turned back to human thanks to you, Mononobe... but I'm not the same as before."

"—Iris?"

I sensed a dangerous atmosphere in Iris' words and intended to look back at her, but Iris hugged me from behind even faster.

"When my dragon mark became your color, Mononobe, I knew. You desired me from the bottom of your heart... And I... also felt that I might be able to make you happy. Even if Mitsuki-chan is your number one, I still don't want to give up... Also—"

Iris wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing tightly against me. I could feel her soft bosom pushing against me with the bath towel in between. Iris' sweet fragrance was also caressing my nose.

"Right now, I'm already... your partner, Mononobe. So—"

"H-Hey."

My heart rate increased as a hot impulse surged within me.

But at the same time, I felt quite worried about any change occurring to Iris.

Marked by me and becoming my mate, Iris had shown no anomalous signs even after repeated examinations.

But just as she had described, she was no longer her former self. If she were to take action as my mate—

"Mononobe... I-I..."

Reaching forward, Iris' hand caressed my body seductively while covered in soap suds. The pleasure caused my back to shudder as my mind went blank.

—Not allowed. This sort of thing...!

If something anomalous had happened to Iris, we could not simply go with the flow like this. I gritted my teeth and turned my head back to face her. However, Iris then said something unexpected.

"I want to look after you, Mononobe!"

She embraced my back tightly and looked at me with serious eyes.

"Huh...?"

Unsure what was going on, I asked in a questioning voice.

"Umm... Mononobe, umm... Apart from me, you also marked Zwei-chan and the rest of them, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

The one I targeted was Iris but Zwei next to her and even Lisa and the others who were far away also had their dragon marks colored.

"After that, Mitsuki-chan and I talked... We've decided to stop yielding to each other. If we keep trying to be considerate for each other, someone else might end up claiming all of you first."

"...What does this have to do with looking after me?"

Still feeling embarrassed by what Iris said, I asked.

"Because a mate is also a 'wife,' right?"

"Well, that's true... Indeed, humans are like that."

Surprised by the word 'wife,' I nodded stiffly.

"That's why I tried to think from a wife's perspective, to make you think I'm amazing. I want to be your wife."

"Iris..."

My face heated up and I found myself unable to tear my gaze away from Iris' moistened eyes.

"So, so, I can't scrub just your back today, Mononobe... I'll give your front a good wash too. You'll be very embarrassed if we do it face to face.. so let's do it this way..."

While hugging me, Iris started to move her hand that had reached around me from behind.

"Wait... N-Not there—"

Noticing Iris' hand gradually moving down, I panicked.

"Why? Does it hurt?"

"N-No, that's not it..."

I could not tell her overtly but letting her continue was not an option either.

I desperately resisted Iris' body warmth, her soft touch and the pleasure coming from her hand caressing me. I grabbed her hand and pulled it away.

"I'm feeling a bit cold so I'm entering the bathtub first. This is water from a real hot spring, so it's really warm."

I spoke with affectation and retreated towards the tub.

"Hey, you can't enter the tub when you haven't washed off the suds on your body!"

Iris pouted. Her point of contention was a bit misplaced.

However, I soaked myself into the water all at once in order to escape from the current situation. The water reached up to my shoulders.

"Seriously, Mononobe, you sometimes act just like a kid."

Pouting, Iris washed the suds off her hands then followed me to the tub.

"Wow, it's a bit hot."

Iris exclaimed in surprise and raised her foot after dipping the tip of her toes into the water. This ended up creating a situation with me staring up at her pale thighs. I frantically looked away.

"Should I add some water?"

"No, you don't have to. I want to get used to your preferred water temperature, Mononobe."

Iris replied as though we were going to be bathing together henceforth, then slowly lowered herself into the tub.

"Hoo— I finally lowered myself entirely. I never thought it'd be that hard."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Iris leaned herself against me.

"H-Hey, with so much space, you don't have to stick to me."

"Because we've been apart all this time, I want to stick to you as much as possible right now... Can't I?"

With her looking up, gazing at me, I could not shake my head.

"No—It's not like... you can't."

"Thanks. I'm so happy, Mononobe."

Iris relaxed her expression. Moving over to me, she rested her head against my shoulder.

"....."

I could feel her body warmth from my shoulder, the point of contact, and also catch a glimpse of her cleavage outside the bath towel—

The water was a bit cloudy because it came from a natural hot spring. The pale thighs that had drawn my gaze earlier were out of sight but now my eyes were pulled to her chest.

My heart rate naturally increased while a bittersweet silence filled the entire bathroom.

Feeling like we were going to remain silent the whole time, I spoke up.

"U-Umm, how's everyone doing?"

My voice echoed in the bathroom. Iris moved slightly. Her beautiful silver hair swayed and brushed against my face.

"Everyone is worrying about you, Mononobe. Also, they're very bored because no one is allowed to go outside except for me. We frequently gather in Mitsuki-chan's room to play video games."

"Even Jeanne and Kili?"

I had trouble imagining them playing together with the rest of the girls, but Iris nodded.

"Yes, Jeanne-chan is super good at games. No one can beat her. And Kili-chan and Vritra-chan have become super serious, it's awful. Zwei-chan is crying there... It's a total mess."

"Haha... That feels quite surreal. But the situation is almost the same as mine. I've been playing games with the principal the whole time too."

I spoke with a wry smile and Iris made a "mm-hmm" expression for some reason.

"Yes... Mononobe, you've been with the principal the whole time."

"Let me be clear, honestly, all we did was play games, okay!?"

I frantically added but Iris' gaze still stung.

"You didn't bathe together like this?"

"The principal suggested it—but I refused resolutely."

The principal said it was for building stronger bonds of friendship, but I refused no matter what.

"Hmph... Well, what about bedtime? There's only one bed in the principal's bedroom."

The sharp question rendered me speechless for a moment.

".....W-Well, I guess it can't be helped...? Umm, we don't sleep together, but it's more like we fall asleep while playing games..."

I explained incoherently. Iris' gaze gradually eased up and she smiled wryly.

"That's nice, I'm so jealous of the principal. But thank goodness..."

"Thank goodness...?"

"Yes, Mononobe, things aren't as difficult for you as we imagined. Now Mitsuki-chan and the others can stop worrying a bit. Tia-chan can also... cheer up too."

Iris smiled and answered but her face became gloomy when Tia was brought up.

"What's up with Tia?"

Very curious, I asked. Iris answered gravely.

"...Starting from when we returned to Midgard, she's been in low spirits ever since. When playing games with us, her face still looks gloomy... She hasn't eaten much either."

At this point, Iris seemed to recall something.

"Umm, Mononobe—Could you go visit Tia-chan, even if just for a little while?"

"Visit her... But I'm under house arrest right now."

I answered Iris' whispered question in a dilemma.

"I know, but we could sneak out... If that doesn't work, we could fly Tia-chan to outside this room."

Iris stared at me seriously and pleaded strongly. She knew that Midgard's decisions must not be disobeyed but she still felt this was necessary.

"Bring Tia here...?"

I asked carefully and Iris nodded slightly.

"...Yes, it feels like she's very troubled. Lisa-chan asked her but she won't speak... So you're the only one left, Mononobe..."

Seeing her rely on me, I tapped her on the head.

"—Something must be done, I get it. I'll try to find a way to speak to Tia."

"Mononobe..."

Relieved, Iris relaxed her expression. Looking at her face, I came up with a simple solution.

"Oh right—Can I use your portable terminal, Iris? Then I can give Tia a call."

My terminal was still under repairs. They probably did not issue a substitute for me because they did not want me to have contact with outside. However, Iris should have her own terminal.

That was what I hoped but she shook her head apologetically.

"Sorry... I had to hand over my terminal when entering the room, together with my bag..."

"It's okay, no need to apologize. On further thought, it's only natural."

I sighed at the naivety of my idea.

"Then that leaves meeting her directly, huh? ...Tia's movements should be restricted too. Leaving the dorm will be hard. I guess it's better than I sneak out then—"

I rested the side of my mouth on my hand and turned my head aside. Iris leaned forward.

"Mononobe, is there anything I can do to help?"

Our bodies were pressed together even closer than before. Not just her shoulder but even her chest was pushing against my arm.

"Huh? Oh, umm..."

Blood rushed into my head all at once, heating up my entire face. With an excessive blood supply circulating in my brain, my thoughts were all tangled together.

"Mononobe?"

With a intrigued expression, Iris peered up at my face. However, this action caused Iris' bath towel to unfasten and her pale and voluptuous breasts to—

"Hey you two!! What on earth are you doing here!!?"

But just at that moment, the bathroom door was flung open and a shrill howl of anger was heard.

"P-Principal..."

I looked over there in shock to see Charlotte standing there sternly with arms akimbo.

She glared with eyebrows raised at Iris and me, pressing against each other in the tub.

"Taking a bath during a visit... What on earth are you two thinking!?"

"S-Sorry!"

Iris was so frightened that she apologized straight away. I was planning to apologize since there was no way to explain this, but Charlotte's next words made me stop.

"Why, why... why didn't you call me!? My friend, isn't it too unfair for you to hog this all alone!?"

Charlotte looked at me tearfully. Stomping her feet in chagrin, she pointed at the cowering Iris.

"You clearly know how much I yearn to take a bath intimately with young maidens!"

"No, I didn't know."

I answered woodenly. Charlotte's body shook, but then she clapped her hands as though thinking of something.

"—Oh right, I can fix this by joining in right away! Then I'll deepen our bonds of friendship and share in the joys of bathing with a girl at the same time!"

Saying that, Charlotte removed her lab coat in the changing area then brought her hands to the hem of her one-piece dress.

"D-Don't look, Mononobe!"

Iris frantically covered my eyes, plunging my view into darkness. Now in a posture of embracing me, Iris was pressing even tighter against me. Due to my vision getting blocked, the soft sensations of Iris' body were getting transmitted even more vividly to me.

"Hey Iris—"

"Ah... Ya—Mononobe, keep still."

My struggling caused our bodies to rub against each other. Iris' cries grew shrill.

"S-Sorry."

I apologized hastily, but was drowned out by a splash. A large ripple formed on the bath water. As a result, Iris loosened her hands from my eyes.

"Hoo, this bath water is so comfortable."

In front of my eyes was Charlotte who had dipped herself up to her shoulders.

It looked like she had jumped in buck naked, but thanks to the cloudiness of the water, all the crucial parts were blocked out of view.

"Thank goodness, I made it just in time..."

Witnessing this scene, Iris breathed a sigh of relief next to me.

"Fufu, I've finally fulfilled one of my dreams! This space is a supreme paradise right now! My friend, young lady, come enjoy a bath together with me!"

Charlotte's both fists were clenched and shaking in excitement. Seeing this, I sighed deeply.

"Charl... As a principal, is this really okay?"

"No problem, I'm just carrying out my duties to keep you under surveillance!"

Charlotte puffed out her flat chest proudly and nodded. Then she suddenly switched to a serious look.

"Well then—I will now continue speaking as the principal. You are not allowed to make contact with anyone whose dragon mark has changed color, no matter what the reason. I absolutely forbid you from sneaking out."

"What..."

Her last sentence made me gasp in surprise.

Iris huddled herself in the tub in embarrassment.

"That's right. Since slightly earlier, I've been waiting for a chance to barge in. It's not like I was getting excited, eavesdropping on your private conversation!"

Slightly reddening in the face, Charlotte declared and coughed once.

"Anyway, I can't let you meet yet. When someone with dragon mark that had changed color makes contact with the dragon that marked her, thus 'transforming into the same kind'... The risks are still unknown. 'Black'

Vritra, who had been spreading D genes might know the truth.. But she won't say anything."

Charlotte spoke in serious tone of voice but Iris replied defiantly.

"But Zwei-chan and I haven't shown any anomalies, right?"

"...That's only for the present so far."

With a stiff face, Charlotte answered suggestively.

"What do you mean?"

Sensing a hidden message, I questioned her.

"Yes... Although I was contemplating whether to say this in front of Iris Freyja, who cannot go back anymore—This is something I needed to convey sooner or later."

Charlotte exhaled as though resolving herself and stared at Iris intently.

"...Although I don't quite get it, since it concerns me, I want to listen!"

Iris replied, prompting Charlotte to nod deeply.

"I know. But for this purpose, first of all—regarding my friend, Mononobe Yuu, it's necessary for me to explain my ideas first."

"About me?"

Charlotte glanced at me as I asked then spoke in a researcher's tone.

"You, who has marked Ds, might not be an irregular male D after all. Instead, you might be a humanoid dragon *like me*."

"Uh..."

I had thought of that myself too. When marking Iris and Kraken Zwei, I realized I was closer to a dragon than anyone else.

But the impact of having someone else point it out was completely different.

"Mononobe, a dragon..."

Iris ruminated those words but did not look that surprised. So this was not something unexpected to her.

"Well, this is basically speculation. But following this line of speculation, Iris Freyja—having become his mate—is already the same species of dragon as my friend."

"Really...? That's what I turned into huh? I can't go back to being human anymore."

With her hand on her chest, Iris remarked.

"Iris—"

I reached for her shoulder worriedly but noticed her smiling at me, shaking her head.

"It's okay. I don't mind being with Mononobe. Rather, it's better to say I'm overjoyed."

Her expression showed sincerity from the heart rather than putting on a brave face.

Seeing this smile, I felt warm feeling surge from the bottom of my heart.

"...Thank you."

While thanking her, I placed my hand on Iris' shoulder. Putting her hand on top of mine, she smiled and said:

"I'm the one who must say thanks. Mononobe, you saved me. The same goes for Zwei-chan. Surely, things are happier the way they are now."

Perhaps turning into a human-like dragon might be happier for Iris, who had been undergoing dragonification to turn into the Basilisk's successor. And the same also enabled Kraken Zwei to live among humans. But—

"However, there is no advantage for the others to become your mates, my friend."

Charlotte spoke what I was thinking.

"Not only that, there might be other risks too. The greatest being possible homeostasis in the ability to generate dark matter."

"Possible homeostasis in the ability to generate dark matter?"

Unable to understand what she meant instantly, I asked Charlotte.

"Ds lose their powers naturally when they become pregnant or reach the age of twenty or so. But if they turn into a dragon, they might not lose their powers."

"Eh... But isn't that good?"

Iris cocked her head in a daze.

"Don't you get it? People with the ability to generate dark matter are obliged to be confined to Midgard and managed. In other words, you might not be able to leave Midgard for the rest of your life."

"Oh—"

Shocked, Iris exclaimed in surprise.

"Even after reaching adulthood, not being able to return to one's country... not being able to return to family."

I looked at the dragon mark on my left hand and muttered. This was quite a heavy revelation. Even if it was just a possibility, I could not accept it so easily.

We had left Midgard a number of times, but under the special reason of fighting dragons. This type of special exception was probably not going to come up again.

"Indeed, as a result, coming into contact with you must happen with the other party's full understanding of the risks. Hence, direct meetings are forbidden for now."

"...I got it."

I must not sneak out from here to meet them. I nodded. If I came into contact with Tia, it could very well decide the rest of her life.

"Good. If you want to talk, just give them a call. I will return your repaired terminal to you later."

"Eh, I can?"

I confirmed in surprise.

"From the moment I allowed you to meet Iris Freyja, the information blackout had already been lifted. They will be informed later of the risks I just told you. That way, none of you will act recklessly, I hope."

Charlotte smiled at me and nodded.

"—Somehow, it feels like it's been a long time since I saw this side of yours."

I smiled wryly and she pouted.

"That's so rude. This is your punishment for saying something so malicious!"

Splash, Charlotte threw bath water at me.

"Uwah—Well... Since you're doing this, that means you're prepared to be counterattacked, right?"

I clasped my hands together and squeezed water out from between them forcefully. In other words, an impromptu water gun.

"Wapu!?"

Shot in the face directly with bath water by me, Charlotte shook her head then immediately approached with an excited face.

"What move was that just now!? How do you do it!?"

"Mononobe, you're so amazing! Shoot again!"

Iris also leaned towards me in curiosity.

Surrounded by two girls, I was panicking inside while I raised my hands towards them.

"Don't you know? If you put your hands together like this, leaving a gap on one side, then push—Look."

I slowly demonstrated again and the two of them went "wow" in amazement.

"Wow, Mononobe, I did it!"

Iris excitedly shot bath water at the wall again and again.

"Oh! I did it too! I can't believe you knew this kind of fun technique, I'm impressed, my friend!"

The excited Charlotte suddenly stood up.

"C-Charl—"

With no towel, her bare skin was presented before me. My gaze was drawn completely to this slender and adorable body.

"Wah!! Don't look!!"

Iris frantically inserted herself between Charlotte and me, intending to cover my eyes. But the sudden intense movement caused her bath towel, which was hanging precariously in the first place, to slowly drift away.

"Ah—"

Reddened from the bath, Iris' naked body rushed into my view. A large volume of blood shot straight to my head.

Without any obstructions, Iris' body was both beautiful and stimulating. My consciousness gradually faded as my strength slowly drained.

"Mononobe!"

Hearing Iris' frantic voice, my mind went blank.

"Charlotte-sama! What on earth are you three doing!!?"

Before all my senses faded away, I heard Maika-san's scolding voice.

Part 2

"Sigh..."

Sitting in the balcony of the principal's bedroom with a evening breeze blowing, I sighed gloomily.

Fainting at the sight of naked bodies, I had shown a pathetic side to Iris.

I most likely passed my limit because that kind of shocking imagery had appeared just as I was desperately controlling myself.

I woke up to find myself lying on the bed. Visiting time with Iris was already over.

I still wanted to speak to Iris so I took out my portable terminal from my shirt pocket.

Maika-san had returned it to me earlier. Just as Charlotte had said, my freedom of communication had been restored. Since I was allowed to make calls now, I could talk to Iris soon.

However—I should first call those whom I was not allowed to meet directly yet.

I furtively glanced behind me through the balcony window to peer into the room. Over there, Charlotte was seated while being lectured by Maika-san.

I felt uncomfortable about Charlotte taking the full blame, but to stop the girls from worrying, I should call them first.

I began to operate with my fingers, planning to dial the number of Tia whom Iris was very worried about.

—No, before that, should ask I someone apart from Iris about Tia's condition?

Before I dialed, I thought of that and called Mitsuki instead.

Putting the terminal against my ear, I waited for Mitsuki to pick up.

Pururururuuru, pururururuuru, puru—

'Is it Nii-san!?'

The third ring was interrupted as I heard Mitsuki's voice loudly from the receiver.

"Oh, yes—It's me. Don't yell so suddenly, Mitsuki."

Startled by the sudden yell, I replied on the phone call.

'Oh... S-Sorry. But I have been waiting the whole time... Nii-san, are you doing well?'

Was it because it had been so long? Mitsuki's voice sounded a bit nervous.

"I'm doing great. By the way, didn't you hear about me from Iris?"

'Of course I heard... But I felt even more worried! Playing games with the principal till very late every night, this type of lifestyle will ruin your health!'

Mitsuki scolded me in a forceful tone of voice. It was honest advice, so I accepted it honestly.

"Yeah, I'll be careful from now on."

'Are you eating properly? You are not filling your stomach with junk food, I hope?'

"Maika-san brings me three meals a day. The nutritional balance is perfect."

'Exercise?'

"Not really sufficient... But I do muscle training and the like."

'Are you brushing your teeth properly?'

"When I get up in the morning..."

That was the result of playing until I fell asleep. But upon hearing my reply, Mitsuki said anxiously:

'Unacceptable! You will get cavities if you do not brush your teeth before you go to bed!'

"I-I know. I'll start today."

Overwhelmed by Mitsuki's forcefulness, I hastily replied.

'Seriously... Nii-san, please pay proper attention. Oh, is there anything lacking over there? I could ask Iris-san to bring necessities to you—'

"T-There's no problem at the moment. By the way, how are things on your side, Mitsuki? You slept for so long because of Vritra's poison... Are there any after effects?"

Deciding that Mitsuki's questioning was not going to stop, I decisively changed the conversation's direction and asked my own question.

'None at all. It is just that—the dormitory has become lively all of a sudden. It is not easy surrounded by everyone.'

Mitsuki replied with a wry smile. Iris said that everyone was enjoying themselves, but things must be difficult from Mitsuki's position.

"You're all living together now, right? Also, about Tia..."

I finally brought up the main point, but the terminal on the other side was suddenly plunged into a commotion.

'—Eh? Hey, stop that! Nii-san and I are currently—'

I heard Mitsuki's frantic voice then a different voice spoke from a distance.

'Mononobe-kun, good evening.'

"This voice—Are you Firill?"

I asked in surprise and the other side answered "yes." There was also a faint "return it to me—" from Mitsuki.

'I'd like to talk to Mononobe-kun, so let's switch for a bit.'

"...But I think I heard Mitsuki and she's not very pleased."

'You imagined it.'

Firill asserted. Was she running away from Mitsuki? I heard a patter of footsteps.

"Looks like you're having fun over there."

'Yes, it feels as amusing as camp. But... I think it'll be even more fun if you were around.'

"R-Really? Thanks..."

Embarrassed by such a direct compliment, I thanked her clumsily.

'When can we meet again?'

"Hmm—I'm not sure either."

I answered ambiguously.

I was allowed to meet Iris, but I still did not know about the future.

If the girls learned from the principal about the risks of becoming my mates, Firill and the others would probably be able to understand the current situation.

In the worst case, my freedom might be restricted indefinitely. Perhaps I might not be allowed to meet anyone but Iris until they had reached adulthood.

'Is that so...? Then I'll start with internal preparations.'

"Preparations?"

What was she talking about? I frowned.

'Preparations to make you my prince, Mononobe-kun. It will be hassle when the critical moment comes if I don't communicate properly beforehand. I'm a princess, after all.'

"Uh, wait, hold on a sec!"

'I'm not going to wait—You're the one who marked me, Mononobe-kun!'

Ignoring me in my panic, Firill laughed.

"T-That's..."

'Oh, let's switch it up because Mitsuki is catching up. Lisa, catch! It's a call from Mononobe-kun!'

Firill informed me without listening to my answer. Her voice gradually grew distant while I heard a "W-What!?" from Lisa. I seemed like there were others present apart from her with sounds of a great commotion.

After some rustling noise, I heard Lisa's voice on the receiver.

"Mononobe Yuu... is it?"

"Yeah, it's me, so it's your turn, Lisa?"

"Yes—How should I put this? It feels like it has been so long."

Doubt vanished and her voice became gentle.

"Yeah, me too. What's it like over there right now?"

Feeling a mysterious sense of reassurance, I asked Lisa.

'Well... I was clearing up after dinner and preparing tea for everyone in the dining hall just now. Then suddenly, Firill-san—Oh, could you wait a second? Mitsuki-san is throwing a tantrum...'

As a result, Lisa's voice grew faint while saying something.

I thought the terminal would return to Mitsuki's hands... But Lisa's voice spoke again.

"Thank you for your patience. Thanks to Mitsuki-san's benevolence, we will now take turns to speak with you in order. However, I do feel sorry for Mitsuki-san, so let me say this—"

Next, Lisa's voice changed and she said in gentle tone:

'You don't need to feel too conflicted. Although I said you have to take responsibility for my dragon mark changing color, I have no intention of leaving you to agonize alone. Let us think of solutions together. I will call you next time.'

"Got it... Thanks. Lisa, you're honestly a good woman."

I felt a little more relaxed and thanked her. Then an irritated voice came from the terminal.

'Goodness gracious, quit making fun of me! Well then, Ren-san is next.'

"Sure—"

I lost the chance to ask about Tia again, but her turn will come again, right? Thinking that, I wanted for Ren to speak.

'...Onii-chan?'

"Yeah, Ren, how are you?"

'...Mm.'

She responded affirmatively but there was slight hesitation, so I asked her:

"What's wrong? You don't sound too upbeat?"

'No, I'm fine. It's just... a bit lonely. Onii-chan is not here, Ariella too..."

Ren stopped halfway and stayed silent.

"Ariella?"

I had already heard about Tia acting strange but something was up with Ariella too?

'...Nothing. But if possible, Onii-chan, please call Ariella afterwards. She's not here right now.'

"I see—Got it."

'Mm, I'm counting on you. Oh—'

I agreed to Ren's request solemnly but then I heard a brief bout of noise from the other side.

'—I'm next, Yuu. I'm so happy that we finally get to speak.'

"Kili huh...?"

Noticing that the speaker had changed, I spoke the name of the voice's owner.

'What is this? You don't sound too happy.'

"No, it just feels so unbelievable that you're hanging out with everyone, drinking tea."

I answered with a wry smile and heard Kili chuckling.

'...That's true. Hanging out alone is boring me to tears so I'm hanging out with them. But indeed, it is hard to imagine. It reminds me of my time as Tachikawa Honoka.'

Kili brought up the alias she had used when infiltrating Midgard under a different identity in the past.

"Don't do anything crazy like that time."

In her attempt to take Tia away, Kili had summoned Hekatonkheir, injured Lisa and caused great damage to Midgard. I warned her to prevent that something like that from happening again.

'That will depend on you. Life here is very enjoyable but I will soon tire of it. If you don't come see me soon, my patience is almost about to reach its limit.'

"—Please, don't force things. The principal and Maika-san will be going there soon to explain to you girls."

'Is that so...? Since things are progressing, I will wait a little longer. However, waiting is pointless for me. Becoming your mate is already something I decided a long time ago.'

There was a dangerous aura in her words. Indeed, she probably had nothing to deliberate over. As someone who took a D's abilities for granted, perhaps acquiring permanent powers might not be a bad thing in her view. However—

"Aren't you afraid you might turn into something whose identity is unknown?"

'Of course I'm not afraid. With this, I will finally turn into "the real thing." Am I right, Mother?'

Was Vritra nearby? Kili had addressed her question towards a different direction, but I did not hear any answer.

'—Fufu, Mother is sulking in silence. Looks like she wants a turn but that's not necessary.'

Kili laughed with delight. Vritra's unhappy face seemed to surface before my eyes.

"Then who else is over there?"

I wanted to have a turn with Tia if she was there, so I asked.

'Iris-chan is the only one who still hasn't spoken to you. But since she met you today already, there's no need.'

After Kili said that, I heard a faint 'eh, no way' from Iris. But compared to what they were talking about, Kili's way of addressing Iris attracted more of my attention.

"Iris-chan...?"

That was what Kili had called her, so I asked. Then in a rare display, Kili's unnerved voice replied.

'W-What, is it very creepy? She calls me Kili-chan so I'm simply responding like with like.'

"Well... You seem to be getting along well, thank goodness."

'I'm a bit miffed at how close she is with you...'

Kili grumbled in disappointment and sighed deeply.

'Also, Jeanne-chan and the sleepy Zwei have returned to their room. When she finds out she missed out on a chance to talk to you, she'll definitely feel like dying of regret.'

Kili added as an afterthought but even then, she did not bring up Tia.

"What about Tia?"

'She's in her own room too.'

"Although I heard from Iris that she's in low spirits..."

I asked cautiously but Kili remained silent. Did she stand up to move? I heard footsteps.

'—It's true that Tia is behaving strangely, but I don't know the reason either... However, I've seen her talking alone with Mother recently.'

Lowering her voice, Kili finally answered.

"With Vritra?"

I realized she must have moved to avoid Vritra's earshot.

'Yes... Perhaps as Yggdrasil, Tia had said something to Mother. Her synchronization with the core is probably finished at last.'

"What—"

I had forgotten completely after resolving the Kraken Zwei incident. Vritra had taken human guise originally for the sake of conversing with Tia who had taken control of Yggdrasil.

To keep her own identity intact, Tia had kept her connection to Yggdrasil at a minimum, but for the sake of negotiations, she had been cautiously increasing the synchronization rate.

'Yuu, at this rate, you might turn into an outsider, you know? This is no time to be letting others control your situation, thus wasting time. Also, that woman who's Midgard's principal is a dragon, right?'

"Y-Yeah..."

The principal was the gray dragon—"Gray" Vampire. I had heard from Iris that Shinomiya-sensei had informed the girls of that. Kili must have been present too at the time.

'Personally, I can't trust her without reserve like you guys. The current situation—and you as well—everything is under her control, isn't it?'

"That sort of thing—"

I reflexively intended to deny it but Kili interrupted me.

'Are you going to deny it? Do you know her that well?'

"....."

I could not refute her. It was true that there were many things I did not know about Charlotte.

'In any case, you cannot possibly become a pitiful man whose thoughts get swayed by others. You are my mate, surely more than anyone else—'

Kili spoke passionately but halted mid-sentence when footsteps could be heard.

'...Your sister is here so I have to return the terminal to her. We will meet face to face next time to talk.'

After saying that, she handed the terminal to Mitsuki without waiting for my answer.

'Phew, I can finally speak with you, Nii-san. Then let us continue the earlier conversation—'

From this point onward, I conversed with Mitsuki almost the entire time, then the call ended.

Kili's words kept echoing in my mind. I looked into the room and seemed like the lecturing had ended. However, Charlotte was sprawled on the bed in exhaustion.

It was hard to be wary when looking at her in that state, but I decided there was indeed a need for a deeper understanding of Charlotte's affairs.

Intending to return to the room, I recalled what Ren had said and stopped.

Tia might have gone to bed but Ariella was probably still awake.

Thinking that, I dialed her number. There was a ring then I heard a message indicating the side was switched off.

"What's going on..?"

Looking at the screen showing the call did not connect, I turned my neck.

Tia too, had something happened somewhere outside my knowledge?

As Kili said, I really would become an outsider at this rate. However, escaping just like that would not be right either.

What should I do? Without reaching an answer, I returned to the room where Charlotte was.

Mild anxiety was sprouting in my heart.

Part 3

"Mononobe-san, you will be examined today. Please follow me."

The next day, I was informed by Maika-san as soon as I got up in the morning.

It had been a while since I last left Charlotte's private bedroom. Passing through her office, I took the clock tower's elevator and traveled downwards.

I had been examined once, after returning to Midgard and before getting placed on house arrest. That had taken place in an examination room in the medical building, but this time was different.

As a side note, Charlotte was still resting in her room. I had gone to bed early after listening to Mitsuki's advice yesterday. Sulking, Charlotte had apparently played video games the whole night on her own.

"This place... is the floor with a training site, right? What kind of examination will we be doing?"

When the elevator stopped at a level deep underground, I asked Maika-san.

"Iris-san was examined after coming into contact with you yesterday but there were no issues. Hence, as a test, we will allow you to make contact with the other person who has transformed."

"Eh, so that means—"

The only one I marked and have become "my kind" were Iris and Kraken Zwei.

"Unlike Iris-san, one cannot predict what might happen when you two confront each other. Hence, we will have you meet in a training site as a precautionary measure."

Maika-san explained then led me to one of the training sites on this floor.

After passing two layers of sealed doors, we entered a space so vast that it made people forget they were underground.

A number of lights were suspended from the ceiling. On the side was a control room separated by glass.

There were three figures in the center of the spacious training site.

"Captain!"

As I approached, one of them waved to me. Platinum blonde hair. Dressed in a male uniform same as mine. Despite dressing as a man, she was a girl—Jeanne Hortensia, who used to belong to the same team as me under NIFL.

Next to her was Brynhildr Class' homeroom teacher, Shinomiya-sensei, and a petite girl with purple hair.

Shinomiya-sensei approached Maika-san and me with a smile, but the purple-haired girl seemed very shy and hid behind Jeanne's back.

She was the second-generation dragon who had burst onto the scene fiercely, Kraken Zwei.

She was the daughter of the dragonified Shinomiya Miyako. Her human appearance and sanity had been restored due to transforming into "my kind." Although recently born, she looked like a young elementary schooler in appearance, slightly younger than Tia.

"Mononobe Yuu, you finally came. Shion must be happy to see you."

Shinomiya-sensei took a step forward to greet me but the name I was hearing for the first time made me frown and ask:

"Shion?"

Shinomiya-sensei immediately made a wry smile and indicated towards the girl hiding behind Jeanne's back.

"It's her. As a human—as Miyako's daughter—she needed a suitable name. Shion, or *Aster tataricus*, is the name of Miyako's favorite flower which is why I used a name that's pronounced identically. It also feels like a good match for this child's vibes... But she doesn't seem to like this name."

As though to prove this point, the girl did not react at all to what Shinomiya-sensei said. Jeanne showed a complicated expression on her face when she saw that.

"Perhaps it's my fault for calling her Zwei. She already considers it her name and doesn't respond to any other names."

After Jeanne explained, the girl peeked out slightly to stared at Shinomiya-sensei.

"i Am, Zwei, not, Shion."

Her speech was broken but the girl did speak properly in Japanese. During the trip back to Midgard, I did not get a chance to say hi to her but during this short amount of time, it looked like she could now carry out conversations.

"B-But Shion—"

"wRonG."

The girl kicked Shinomiya-sensei for insisting.

"Hmm... Have I no choice but to give up?"

Shinomiya-sensei slumped her shoulders sadly.

Watching this scene, I bent down to speak to the girl.

"Zwei."

Her shoulders shook then she hid behind Jeanne again. But soon after, she timidly showed half her face to peek at me.

"wHat?"

Called by the name she approved, she probably had to respond. The girl asked hesitantly.

Now that I looked at her face to face, she really was an ordinary girl. She was no longer the enemy whom Iris and I fought in a battle of life and death. The slight wariness lingering in my heart vanished.

"I know Jeanne's name for you is very important. But you should know that people don't just have one name."

For the sake of Shinomiya-sensei, who was quite hurt, I looked the girl in the eye and told her that.

"dOn'T juSt hAvE... one?"

"Yes—For example... Oh right, you're living together with Iris now, aren't you?"

The girl nodded at my question.

"Yes, Iris, i KnOw. vEry nOisY pErsOn, ofTen maKes Mitsuki and Lisa aNgrY."

—So Iris hasn't changed at all.

I smiled wryly. The girl had already memorized the names from Brynhildr Class. That made things easy.

"Yes, that Iris calls me Mononobe. Firill and Ariella calls me Mononobe-kun. Tia calls me Yuu. Lisa calls me Mononobe Yuu. Mitsuki calls me Nii-san. Ren calls me Onii-chan. Jeanne always calls me Captain. See, they're all different, right?"

"...Mm."

The girl nodded honestly.

"That's why you don't need to be fixated on a single name. Names are used to represent you, so they're fine as long as you know who it is. Shion Zwei Shinomiya—I think that would be a suitable name for you now."

I stared into the girl's eyes and told her my thoughts.

"Shion Zwei Shinomiya..."

The girl kept repeating the name on the tip of her tongue as though to confirm.

I rubbed the girl's head and examined the dragon mark on her forehead under her bangs.

"Ah..."

The girl widened her eyes slightly in surprise.

"What's wrong?"

"Mama sAid bEfoRe... You are sPeCiaL."

"Mama?"

No way. I looked at Jeanne.

"Actually... She means me."

Jeanne scratched her own cheek in embarrassment and nodded stiffly.

"—Papa."

I was dumbfounded by what the girl said next.

I turned my gaze back to the girl. She was staring straight at me.

"Papa."

"Are you referring to... me?"

The girl nodded at my timid question.

"sPeciAl pErsOn iS Papa, Mama saId thAt."

Slightly apprehensive earlier, the girl was now looking at me, blinking.

Due to becoming "my kind" as a result of direct contact, it was possible that the girl felt something. But why was she calling me "Papa"?

"Jeanne?"

Seeking an explanation, I turned to "Mama" Jeanne. Blushing intensely, she waved her hands.

"U-Umm, Captain, please do not get the wrong idea! Uh, I have no intention of creating a fait accompli. I felt that this was necessary—P-Please step aside for a moment."

Frantically, Jeanne led me by the hand to somewhere slightly farther away.

Sneaking a peek at the girl who was spacing out next to Shinomiya-sensei, Jeanne lowered her voice and started explaining to me.

"Zwei... has already made contact with you and turned into your mate, is that correct?"

"Ah yes."

Jeanne looked a bit worried while whispering quietly to me. I concurred.

"So I was predicting that she might have some sort of reaction when meeting you this time, Captain."

"—Yes. In fact, when I touched her head just now, she seemed to have felt something."

"Yes... But if Zwei realizes she is your mate, Captain, and takes corresponding action... It would be very very bad!"

Despite controlling her voice, Jeanne insisted fiercely.

Action corresponding to a mate... Hearing these words, I was reminded of my bath with Iris yesterday, so I frantically shook my head.

"T-That's definitely bad—How should I put it? It'd be a crime."

"Yes. That sort of mindset and behavior is too early for Zwei. So even if she feels you are special, Captain, I taught her that it was a feeling for family like me."

"Then that's how 'Papa' came about huh..."

I finally understood how the process went, but was there really no other way?

"Papa... Mama...?"

Hearing a worried voice from behind, I looked back to see the girl watching us uneasily.

"Don't worry! I'm done talking to Papa."

Pulling me by the hand again, Jeanne led me back to the girl.

To reassure her, Jeanne stroked the girl's head, causing her to close her eyes partially to enjoy the comfortable feeling.

"...Papa?"

Then she looked at me with eyes of anticipation.

"Oh, umm, sorry for making you wait."

I stroked the girl's purple hair and she smiled contentedly. Such innocent goodwill made me feel an involuntary surge of tender affection towards her.

"iF Papa saYs so... cAlliNg mE Shion Zwei Shinomiya iS fIne."

"Really!?"

The one reacting in surprised joy was Shinomiya-sensei rather than me.

"tO BeGin, Shion... tHiS namE, i dOn'T haTe it."

"...!"

Extremely moved, Shinomiya-sensei covered her mouth and frantically turned around. She must be overjoyed that her younger sister's orphan had accepted this name.

"Then I'll start calling you Shion, can I?"

"Yes—but Mama, hAs to kEep cAlliNg mE Zwei."

The girl—Shion—nodded while telling Jeanne her wish.

"As you wish, Zwei."

Jeanne smiled gently and accepted Shion's request.

"Mama, Papa!"

Holding hands with Jeanne and me, Shion swayed happily back and forth.

"—Mononobe-san, you have gained a wife and a daughter all of a sudden."

Having witnessed everything silently, Maika-san commented with amusement.

"P-Please don't make fun of me..."

"Fufu, my apologies."

Smiling while apologizing, Maika-san patted Shinomiya-sensei's shoulder while she had her back to us.

"Haruka, this is wonderful."

"...Yes."

Shinomiya-sensei replied, sounding like she was crying.

At this moment, perhaps I had finally brought her salvation.

—What about Mitsuki?

Mitsuki had been tormented the whole time ever since she executed the dragonified Miyako.

Praying that Shion's existence could turn into an opportunity for Mitsuki's salvation, I caressed the head of my innocently smiling "daughter."

Shion's hair, which used to be made of hard mithril, was now as smooth as silk and very soft.

Part 4

After the meeting, Maika-san and I returned together to Charlotte's private bedroom.

Charlotte's breathing in slumber could still be heard from the bed. The only thing that had changed since we left was her sleeping posture.

Her clothing had rolled up to expose her belly button. I covered her up properly with the blanket then walked to the balcony.

I should take this chance to give Ariella a call. It was just past noon so she shouldn't be sleeping.

But just as I took out my portable terminal, I suddenly heard the ringing of an incoming call. The screen indicated the caller was unknown.

To this date, there were only two people who always dialed this number as unknown callers.

One was Ren's father, Miyazawa Kenya. The other was—

"....."

Doubtfully, I touched the screen to pick up the call.

'—Hello, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

The instant I heard this voice, my entire body's muscles tensed up.

Appearing on the screen was the face of my superior officer during my NIFL days, Loki Jotunheim.

While feeling surprised, I also thought—Sure enough.

I had a feeling that he was going to contact me recently.

Roughly a week earlier, the sneering man portrayed in the screen here had sent out a team of drones led by Hreidmar to attack us at the mountain villa where we were taking refuge.

At the time, I had conversed with Major Loki over Hreidmar's communication.

The fact that Hreidmar's armor contained only smoke. The statement that change would be triggered by acquiring power. Then there was what he said about the true identity of the almost complete "Fafnir"—

"Major Loki... Are you sure it's okay to talk to me now? Isn't it necessary for the Midgardsormr defense system to switch to interception mode before you can communicate without Midgard's knowledge?"

Trying to find time for my turbulent emotions to calm down, I raised a question.

From this balcony on the top floor of the clock tower, I could see the blue ocean surrounding Midgard.

Midgardsormr would rise above the water during emergencies to form defensive lines but it was not activated at the moment.

'Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Remember I visited during Midgard's school festival as a member of the observing delegation? I put many preparations into place back then. By the way, I also know that you are currently alone in the balcony on the clock tower's top floor. This comes from a satellite that was launched a few days ago for monitoring Midgard.'

Revealing a bit of his mischief, Major Loki smiled and said:

"—Satellite aside, it would be troublesome if Midgard were to discover those preparations. By the way, I'm not obliged to keep quiet."

I looked up while warning Major Loki. Given current technology, even discerning a person's face from satellite orbit would be a piece of cake. It looked like he had called me after confirming I was alone.

'You can report all you like. It is no longer necessary for NIFL to maintain a superficial stance.'

"What... do you mean?"

Noticing something dangerous in Major Loki's words and expression, I asked in return.

'Don't you get it? It's easy to figure out once you understand what the world has become.'

Major Loki shrugged with a surprised look and continued:

'Dragons are monsters roaming freely across the world. Mankind's common enemy, disasters requiring total cooperation between humans to handle. Hence, Asgard was established and NIFL, a military force with international jurisdiction, was organized. You should know all this.'

"—Yes."

I nodded and started to realize what Major Loki was implying.

'But there are no more dragons in the world. All dragon have been exterminated. At least on the surface.'

Major Loki said suggestively. I did not know how much information NIFL had gathered on Vritra, but judging by his mentioning of "Gray" in the past, he most likely knew of Charlotte being a dragon.

"Asgard and NIFL no longer have a reason to exist... Is that what you mean?"

'Indeed. Putting Asgard aside, NIFL will be dismantled recently, downsized and converted into an organization centered around D-related missions. Consequently, there is no longer any need to consider NIFL's position.'

Revealing he did not care about souring relations with Midgard, Major Loki narrowed his slender eyes.

'What we should consider is what comes later. Having lost the common enemy of dragons, you should know what will happen to humanity, right?'

"Conflict between humans—Is that what you're talking about? But I don't think large-scale war as before will break out between humans after cooperating together until now."

Noticing Major Loki's point, I refuted him in a forceful tone. However, he sighed in surprise again and shook his head.

'You've got it backwards, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Twenty-five years ago, dragons appeared, forcing humanity to put aside many things, concealing, holding back dissatisfaction and hatred. Once the dam is gone, all hell will break loose. Signs of this are already appearing all over the world.'

"No way..."

Because we defeated the dragons, world stability was collapsing?

'—Oh, don't misunderstand. I don't mean to blame you. Rather, I should praise you. You exterminated dragons, bringing the world closer to its original state. However...'

For the first time, the smile vanished from Major Loki's face.

'The world remains unnatural due to a dragon's existence. By the hand of the "Gray" Vampire—Charlotte B. Lord.'

"—"

As I had thought, Major Loki knew Charlotte's true identity, but more than that, I was more surprised by Major Loki's face and voice when he said Charlotte's name.

Conveyed there was intense hatred. It was my first time seeing Major Loki with such overt emotions.

'Take out "Gray," 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

"What..."

Staring straight from the screen, Major Loki ordered me.

'This is the reason why I contacted you this time. To save humanity, I hope you will help. The current "Fafnir" should be able to eliminate her.'

"W-Wait! It's true that the principal is a dragon but she's on the side of humans—"

'Wrong, "Gray" is not on humanity's side. What she protects is something different.'

Major Loki interrupted me and jeered.

'In the world plunged in great war, "Gray" has committed grave sins. Many lives were lost for no reason at all, due to her fault.'

"That's... impossible!"

A gaming enthusiast, sometimes scolded by Maika-san, sometimes acting like a principal, Charlotte was trustworthy.

I could hardly believe she had taken many lives. However, Major Loki's words were filled with certainty.

'"Gray" is a monster that dominates mankind, toying with humans as her pawns. Her father too—'

However, the screen on the terminal was suddenly scrambled and Major Loki's voice was cut off.

"—Don't insult my father."

I felt an intense chill down my back.

Charlotte was standing next to the balcony's French windows. Starting when, I had no noticed at all.

Normally relaxed with a sunny smile, her face was now shrouded in cold fury.

"Charl...?"

I forced a word out and she raised her right hand with a slight twist in the corner of her mouth. Held in her right hand was something resembling a switch.

"This room is equipped to cut off communications through electromagnetic interference. I used it."

Charlotte shrugged and explained how she had interrupted Major Loki's call. Her tone of voice was carefree as usual, but her eyes were not smiling at all.

"You heard the conversation just now?"

"Yes, pretty much starting from the part about me distorting the world. My friend... Are you going to follow that man's orders to take me out?"

I could not read any emotions from Charlotte's voice.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to take you out, Charl."

I instantly replied but Charlotte shrugged slightly.

"Are you sure? What if he was speaking the truth?"

"...Huh?"

I gasped and responded in shock.

"It is true that no small number of lives have been lost on account of my will and choices. Perhaps for humans... I might be the worst dragon."

Smiling in self-mockery, she looked at the dumbfounded me, turned around and returned to the room.

I felt anxious about needing to say something, but confronted with the view of her back, I was unable to say anything.

Chapter 2 - Niflheim's Circle of Hell

Part 1

The special forces team directly under Major Loki Jotunheim's command—Sleipnir.

This team, envisioned for combat against Ds, was where children with special talents had been gathered.

Named after an eight-legged flying horse, the initial team consisted of eight members.

One of them was Kunato Ktinos, currently looking at his teammates assembled in the battleship Naglfar's operations room.

Everyone looked terrible in demeanor with hollow gazes but exuded killing intent from their entire body, filling the whole operations room with an unusual sense of tension.

Things were not like this initially. When the team was first formed, the mood was quite lively because they were all children.

The hot-blooded duo of Otr Axe, wielder of outstanding monstrous strength, and Regin Club, the martial arts expert, would spend their days quarreling. The talkative Robin Dark would prattle all day long, a true annoyance. The straitlaced Sigurd Gram, very strict on rules, was very noisy in a different way. Lancelot Ignite, who always did things his own way, would fan flames and pour fuel on various fires depending on the situation. The highly disciplined Nataku Yue would take every opportunity to train no matter what the situation, upholding a policy of uninvolvement.

The one who always served as their arbitrator and settled things was the Japanese who had been promoted as their captain—Mononobe Yuu.

Major Loki had said the following to those eight.

The eight of you are one beast—Sleipnir.

However, when Major Loki changed his plans after conferring the codename of "Fafnir" upon Mononobe Yuu, he added a ninth member to Sleipnir.

This was the sniper with rare *eyes*, John Hortensia.

The reason was most likely because Mononobe Yuu's abilities were too outstanding. He could already turn into a terrifying monster all by himself. Hence, Major Loki decided there was a need to fill in the vacant spot.

But right now, there were only seven members present. Sleipnir was incomplete.

Starting with Mononobe Yuu's departure, vibes in the team had changed a bit. This process accelerated with John's desertion.

After being admitted to a medical facility following their failure to take down Kraken Zwei, the reunited teammates acted almost like strangers to one another.

Precisely because he was the smartest and most intellectual in the team, Kunato sensed this, just barely. Sleipnir's members were currently in an abnormal state.

Individual names were meaningless. The team members were all showing the same hollow expressions. Surely, Kunato himself must be putting on the same face as them.

He felt his mind almost covered by white mist. Vague killing intent had invaded the majority of his consciousness.

While they were in such a state, Major Loki leisurely walked in front of them.

"Hello—Everyone. It seems that completion is going superbly."

Loki remarked with satisfaction.

Kunato and the others reflexively saluted in upright and motionless postures. Although the word "completion" seemed to convey something unusual, Kunato could not continue thinking about it.

"The mission I am assigning to you all next is very difficult. However, the last part in Sleipnir's completion will be *achieved on the job*."

Loki kept his eyes narrowed and smiled happily.

"If 'she' possesses the anticipated scrapped genes, as a collective whole, you will be able to become a monster on the same level as 'Fafnir.' Unlike the

Hreidmar series where singular entities are taken to their limit, this power reaches the realm of authorities."

Declaring solemnly, Loki looked back and forth across the members of Sleipnir then settled his gaze upon Kunato.

"...!?"

Confronted with Loki's icy gaze, Kunato felt his breathing stop for an instant.

"Although close, you are still not there yet. Swallow this."

Saying that, Loki placed a red capsule on Kunato's hand.

Kunato had some impression of it. This was one of the medications that had been prescribed to him when he was hospitalized for his injuries.

Instinct told him it was dangerous. However, disobeying Loki was forbidden. Despite trembling, Kunato's body moved on its own.

The instant he swallowed the red capsule, the white mist shrouding his thoughts became even thicker. The hesitation filling his heart disappeared without trace.

"Very well, move out. There is only one person you need to kill—Charlotte Blood Lord."

The instant the murder target was defined, sluggish brains dramatically turned calm and clear all of a sudden.

Their brains were entirely enlisted to find methods to kill her and perform calculations from there.

"Yes sir."

All members replied in the affirmative. Sleipnir's operation began.

For the sake of the missing piece to become a completed beast of slaughter—

Part 2

Mitsuki's personal dormitory stood some distance away from the girls dormitories where Midgard's ordinary students lived.

This dormitory, inhabited by one two residents until recently, was now the place where more than ten girls lived.

Forbidden from going outside, they gathered in Mononobe Mitsuki's room in the leisurely afternoon hours as usual.

Even when under house arrest, the industrious Mitsuki was handling student body president matters at her desk with Lisa helping her. Firill was sitting on a cushion in front of the bookshelves, engrossed in reading Mitsuki's collection. Iris, Tia and Shion were taking a nap on Mitsuki's bed, sleepy after eating their fill at lunch. Jeanne was sleeping next to Shion while Kili and Vritra sat on the sofa, watching a TV program through a satellite broadcast channel.

Among them, only Ren, operating her laptop while leaning against the wall, noticed Ariella leaving the room quietly.

Putting her computer on the floor, Ren chased after her.

"...Onee-chan, where are you going?"

Exiting the room to follow Ariella, Ren asked quietly.

Ren always called her "Ariella" in front of others, but used "Onee-chan" when the two of them were alone. Having lived together as family before coming to Midgard, they were as close as real sisters despite having no blood relation.

Precisely because of that, Ren noticed something was off about Ariella.

"—I'm just going for some exercise. I'll be jogging in the ground floor corridor for a bit."

Turning around, Ariella smiled cheerfully as usual and answered.

"Really...?"

Despite nodding, Ren actually noticed the portable terminal Ariella was carrying when leaving the room.

To prevent Ren from seeing her right hand, Ariella was standing with her left side towards Ren. That hand was probably holding the terminal.

Judging from this situation, she must have left the room to call someone.

Her answer just now was definitely a lie.

"Ren, you'll get fat if you don't exercise a bit, you know?"

Ariella waved her hand lightly and left.

Her facial expression when lying reminded Ren of the first time when they met.

Despite her cheerful behavior, a certain part of Ariella was shrouded in darkness.

Back then, Ariella had taken up a wary attitude towards Ren because she feared herself for becoming a D, smiling in resignation after showing a deeply hurt look.

Not wanting to see her acting that way, Ren had opened her heart to Ariella.

"Onee-chan..."

However, Ren did not know what Ariella was currently thinking. She pressed both hands on her greatly agitated chest.

Part 3

"What was Charl planning in saying those words...?"

Sitting on the bed in the room where I was under house arrest, I voiced the doubt occupying my heart.

After obstructing my conversation with Major Loki, Charlotte had left the room. Maika-san did not come to take her place to monitor me. Calls could not be made, so I was unable to speak to Ariella and Tia.

Without any motivation to train hard, I laid on the bed, turning this way and that, ruminating what Major Loki had said.

A world without dragons, losing stability... The grave sins committed by Charlotte... It was still a mystery which parts were real.

In the end, I did not get to ask about Hreidmar or Fafnir. All that happened was an increase of things I did not know.

—Regarding matters related to Charl, I guess my only choice is to ask her directly.

I had not been able to say anything just now, but this would be the only method to clear up my doubts.

In that case, the only thing I could do now was wait for Charlotte to return.

Lying down made me feel sleepy and I closed my eyes. Since there was nothing to do, a brief afternoon nap would be good.

Thinking that, I handed my consciousness over to sleepiness.

However—at that moment, I should have pondered more carefully.

The significance of Major Loki's timing in calling me then.

This was an essential consideration.

He was the kind of person who had to achieve his goals regardless of what I did—

Woooo—!

I woke up to some kind of loud noise.

"Ugh..."

I rubbed my eyes while getting up, There was a powerful siren sounding in the surroundings.

Instantly realizing that something unusual had happened, I drove away my drowsiness.

No one was in the room. The world outside the window was dyed orange—It was already dusk and I had slept longer than expected.

In any case, I approached the window to confirm the situation.

"What..."

As soon as I looked outside, an obvious emergency entered my view.

—Midgardsormr... had activated.

Normally submerged in the sea, the concentric defense system had floated up, forming physical barriers to surround Midgard on all sides.

The last time I saw such a scene was when Leviathan attacked. However, there were no more dragons that would assault Midgard.

While I was standing there, unsure why this had happened, I heard the door open in the room.

I turned around to look at the entrance, only to see Maika-san looking at me with a stiff expression.

"Mononobe-san, this is an emergency, please come with me."

Maika-san spoke with urgency.

"Maika-san, what on earth happened?"

"We will talk while we walk. We are out of time. Hurry and follow me."

I left the room at her urging. There was no sign of the principal in her office.

Maika-san swiftly brought me to the elevator and pressed the button. Entering the elevator that arrived immediately, she finally started to explain the situation.

"—NIFL has invaded Midgard's territorial waters without permission and surrounded this island. We did not find out until just earlier because Midgardsormr had been neutralized."

"Midgardsormr was neutralized? Is it possible to do that from outside?"

It was truly hard to imagine that Midgardsormr's highly secure electronic systems could get hacked so easily, so I asked Maika-san.

"—Of course it is impossible from outside. But if there is someone collaborating from inside, it is very likely they did something while on the observation visit last time."

Speaking of which, Major Loki said he did something during the school festival.

"But I saw the defensive barriers floating up..."

"We finally managed to regain control of the system so the final defensive line was deployed in the nick of time. In any case, NIFL has been prevented from landing for now, but they will force an inspection, claiming authorization from Asgard."

The elevator descended while we spoke. Instead of stopping at the ground floor, it continued underground.

"Force an inspection?"

"Yes—Midgard is suspected of traitorous behavior against mankind, apparently. Due to official orders, we cannot use Midgardsormr to intercept and repel them either."

Maika-san spoke in a conundrum.

"Traitorous behavior against mankind... Is that referring to us taking Kraken Zwei—no, Shion—back to Midgard?"

"NIFL has not made clear to us their particular suspicions, but she will probably be one of the targets for inspection. Harboring Kili the known terrorist and making contact with Vritra... It is currently unknown how much NIFL knows but there are a number of reasons they could potentially use."

"—In that case, we can't refuse their inspection."

I pursed my lips and whispered. Maika-san nodded.

"Indeed, Charlotte-sama is currently negotiating to forestall them, but it will merely be a question of time before the inspection takes place. When that time comes... It will not do to leave you, Mitsuki-san and the others where NIFL will discover you."

Maika-san looked me in the eye and told me solemnly. At this moment, we happened to reach the lowest level and the elevator stopped. The doors opened.

This floor was where all sorts of infrastructure were concentrated. The exposed piping was particularly conspicuous.

"This way please."

Maika-san led the way for me again as I got out of the elevator.

"In other words, we will hide starting now... Is that it?"

Walking through a maze of corridors one could easily get lost in, I asked Maika-san while she advanced.

"Indeed. Before the United Nations and Asgard make a move to rescind the order, the few of you must hide."

Answering while moving along, Maika-san suddenly stopped in front of a wall covered with piping and placed her hand on it.

"What..."

What appeared before my eyes was a sturdy metal door. Maika-san rotated the massive handle to open the thick door and hurried me.

"We will take the stairs down from here. Please watch your step because it is very dark."

I definitely could see stairs with help from light entering the dark corridor.

Maika-san closed the door after entering, surrounding me in almost complete darkness. However, a light on the ceiling instantly lit up.

Even so, the light was very dim. I could barely make out a winding staircase.

Taking care not to make a misstep, I started along the path with Maika-san.

"Rescind the order... Is that really possible"

When I asked Maika-san, my voice echoed loudly. Glancing at me, she nodded deeply.

"Yes—with Charlotte-sama present, it is guaranteed. However, NIFL has taken measures on their side, so it will take time. If you and the others were to be caught during this period, thus publicly exposing dragon marks whose color had changed and the matter of contact with Vritra, it would be very difficult to salvage the situation."

"So Mitsuki and the girls are up ahead?"

"They are taking a different route, led by Haruka."

Speaking of which, this staircase was continuing onwards to the depths. However, I pointed out something still bothering me.

"Is it really okay for me to meet them? I was isolated all this time clearly because contact was forbidden..."

"This is a question of risk."

"Risk?"

I frowned and asked. Maika-san nodded affirmatively.

"Yes... Due to the lack of information, the risk inherent in the changes caused by contact with you cannot be underestimated. But if by any chance NIFL were to capture someone whose dragon mark had changed color, execution would be very likely. Considering these risks, the decision will be left for the girls to make on their own judgment."

"Mitsuki and the others—They'll make their own choice?"

Shocked by the unexpected explanation, I confirmed with Maika-san.

"This is the best solution—Let them decide their own lives. That was what Charlotte-sama said."

How one lived was more important than what one was—Charlotte had said this in the past.

Hence, she had given Mitsuki and the girls the right to choose their way of living. However, what way of living had Charlotte herself chosen?

The facial expression, which Charlotte had shown while calling herself possibly the worst dragon for humans, flashed in my mind.

"Considering safety concerns, we have to hurry and make contact to cure the colored dragon marks, but—"

What if Mitsuki were to choose contact but regret the decision later on? I felt very hesitant. This was not just their problem. As the one who had changed them, I had to consider my own responsibility.

"Haruka has already informed them of the risks accompanying transformation. They will surely feel just as lost as you are, Mononobe-san. Consequently, I hope you will discuss properly among yourselves to reach a conclusion."

Maika-san's words prompted a sudden realization in me. Here I was, agonizing over things on my own again.

"That's right. I'll try that."

I answered. Maika-san smiled faintly and nodded at me.

The conversation stopped there, leaving only the echoing sound of footsteps bouncing off the walls. The stairs were several times longer than expected. By the time we finally reached the bottom, I already had no idea how many steps there were.

Maika-san opened a door just as sturdy as the one at the entrance. White steam leaked out from the gap.

Passing through the entrance, I found a rocky cavern before my eyes. The humidity was quite high and I felt like I was about to be cooked.

"What on earth is this place..."

Looking back and forth across this cavern which had poor visibility due to the steam, I asked in doubt.

"You are able to use water from a hot spring to take baths in Charlotte-sama's room, right?"

"Oh yeah. I heard that it was drawn from underground—"

"Here is the source."

Maika-san replied. Then we turned a corner and soon reached a vast open space.

"This is an underground... lake?"

The giant subterranean space was filled with milky-white water. The water was seething with bubbles while white team rose from the surface. The water temperature seemed quite high.

"Charlotte-sama calls this place an underground hot spring. It was discovered by chance while Midgard was expanding its underground facilities. She has monopolized it ever since."

Maika-san walked along the shore of the underground lake and gestured with her hand.

"A cottage was built here while installing pumps to extract the water."

Over there was a white house embedded in the cavern's roof and wall. Although it matched the school and the clock tower's contemporary design, it looked very conspicuous in this cavern.

"It's almost like a secret base..."

With my feelings split between impressed and shocked, I looked out to the building by the lake.

"This is quite a good hiding place. This cottage is not recorded on any of Midgard's maps, cannot be reached by elevator, and for a shelter, it is quite difficult to discover. Combined with the fact that this place is equipped with minimum-level facilities for living, there is no better hideout."

Indeed, this place must be reached by going down hidden staircases. Its existence was not exposed either. To keep the hot spring all to herself, Charlotte must have been very thorough in maintaining the secret.

After listening to Maika-san, I looked at the surroundings of the building then noticed the sound of footsteps apart from our own.

—Amidst the white steam, several figures appeared.

"Maika?"

It was Shinomiya-sensei's voice. Having entered a stance on reflex, I relaxed my guard.

"Indeed, it is me, Haruka. Mononobe-san is with me too."

After Maika-san answered. I heard "Nii-san!?" and "Mononobe!"

Just as I was told earlier, Shinomiya-sensei and the girls had arrived via a different route.

We stopped in front of the cottage, meeting up at visual range.

Behind Shinomiya-sensei were all the girls living in Mitsuki's dorm.

"Wah, Mononobe. It's been a day since I last saw you!"

Iris waved happily.

"Nii-san..."

With her hands clasped together before her chest, Mitsuki seemed quite happy to see me after so long. She looked like she wanted to approach me but stopped.

Most likely, she had already heard the risks in touching me.

Lisa, Firill and Ren looked at me without disguising their doubts.

Ariella, whom I had not had a chance to contact yesterday, was standing behind everyone else so I could not read her face.

"...Yuu."

Tia poked her head out from behind Lisa's back and looked at me uneasily. Sure enough, she was not as energetic as in the past. I heard that she had started acting strangely since returning to Midgard, so it was definitely could not be entirely due to the risks in becoming my mate.

"Captain, you've had it rough."

Jeanne lowered her voice and bowed her head. She was carrying the sleeping Shion on her back.

Having brought everyone here Shinomiya-sensei noticed my gaze and smiled wryly.

"Shion is having her afternoon nap. She's the one who carried Shion."

"She's impossible to wake up once she sleeps."

Adding to Shinomiya-sensei's explanation, Kili stepped forward.

Unlike everyone else, she did not show any hesitation on her face. Instead, she was smiling in a carefree manner.

"We finally get to meet—Yuu. I've been looking forward to this moment all along."

She exposed her right hand whose dragon mark was glowing and approached me without hesitation.

"Kili..."

My dragon mark heated up and glowed blue.

"Please wait!"

Mitsuki called out anxiously and grabbed Kili's arm to stop her.

"What are you doing? I don't give a damn about the risks of transformation I just heard about. Originally, I might lose my powers upon adulthood, so I'd say this suits be perfectly fine."

Kili stared at her reproachfully, but Mitsuki did not back down. Instead, she argued back in a forceful tone of voice.

"Be that as it may, this is not a matter that concerns you alone. Since Nii-san will shoulder a heavy responsibility as a result, I believe that both sides need to have a proper discussion before making contact."

"...What a pain."

Kili frowned and whispered.

"Hey, you two—"

Feeling a dangerous mood brewing in the air, I intended to stop them.

"Mitsuki-chan, Kili-chan, don't fight."

But before I could do that, Iris already intervened.

Then Kili took her gaze off Mitsuki as though casting away her malice. Sighing deeply, she said:

"Oh well... It might boring to finish things here straight away. After all, it's a special act for Yuu and I to become mates—Almost like a marriage ceremony."

"A-A marriage ceremony!?"

Mitsuki suddenly screamed, her entire face turning bright red.

Troubled over the risks of transformation, Lisa and the other girls also started to have doubts in a different area.

"Using such a description... It does cause you to become conscious in strange ways."

"Although that's what I intended from the start—It somehow feels so embarrassing when said out loud."

Lisa and the blushing Firill remarked.

"Mm..."

Ren also lowered her head shyly.

However, Iris cried out in extreme panic.

"H-Hold on! Then I'm already married with Mononobe!? A-Although it makes me very happy... I still want a proper marriage ceremony!"

"Calm down, Iris. Marriage is only an analogy. Right now, we are erasing the color on our dragon marks to eliminate the risks in the event of capture."

Silent the whole time until now, Ariella came up and consoled Iris.

Ren had been quite concerned about Ariella in yesterday's phone call, but Ariella looked the same as usual. I was more worried about Tia's silence given that she should be the first to react to the topic of marriage.

"Oh... O-Okay! Ahaha... I've gotten the wrong idea. M-Mononobe—pretend you heard nothing!"

Scratching her head shyly, Iris pleaded to me.

"G-Got it."

Intimidated by Iris' forcefulness, I nodded. Then I heard a sigh of exasperation.

"Verily... Ye are too leisurely."

Shrugging helplessly while taking a step forward was Vritra in a black one-piece dress. Her arms were not restrained but a green vine was wrapped around her neck.

It was a terminal of Yggdrasil for preventing the generation of dark matter. Vritra had regained freedom of movement compared to before, but the fact that she could not use her powers remained unchanged.

"Have ye really understood the situation? Indeed—Yggdrasil's core?"

Saying that, Vritra looked at Tia, who had been silent the whole time.

"..."

Tia's little shoulders shook while she alternated her gaze between me and Vritra. But in the end, she looked down without saying anything.

The girls and I were quite troubled by the way Tia was acting. Silence fell upon the cavern that felt like a steam cooker.

"—Well then, you all need to discuss properly then decided whether to come into contact with Mononobe Yuu or not. For now, please enter the house first. You'll get all sweaty if you keep standing here."

Seeing us stopped, Shinomiya-sensei urged us as though to break the silence.

"Yes, let us go inside to explain how to use the facilities and our course of action from here on."

Maika-san agreed with Shinomiya-sensei and walked towards the cottage.

I followed Maika-san and glanced sideways at the silent Tia.

She had said she wanted to be my wife in the beginning when her dragon mark changed color, but now, she was in such low spirits.

Since I was supposed to talk to the girls next, I must take the opportunity to ask properly why Tia was acting so strangely.

Deciding that in my mind, I entered the door that Maika-san opened.

Part 4

Equipped with insulation and air conditioning, the building was more comfortable than imagined.

The living room behind entryway had extravagant sound and home theater equipment with a large sofa in the middle. There were two doors inside, probably both bedrooms.

There was an air like it was a space Charlotte used to relax.

Although it looked quite spacious from outside, it still felt quite cramped after so many people came in.

Not permitted to touch Mitsuki and the others yet, I stayed on the edge of wall on the far side of the room.

Two groups were naturally formed in the room with Iris, who had already touched me and Jeanne, with Kraken Zwei on her back, on my side.

"—Perfect. Rooms are scarce so Mitsuki-san, your group will stay in the left room while Mononobe-san's group will use the room on the right. I will deliver more bedding and food later to make up for deficiencies."

Standing in between the two groups, Maika-san gave such directions to us.

"I-I can sleep in the same room as Mononobe!?"

Iris was very surprised. Going "w-with the Captain..." in a conundrum, Jeanne was very flustered.

"This is necessary to avoid inadvertent contact. However, numbers are distributed rather unevenly. Those who chose to touch Mononobe-san may switch rooms next."

"I know you all should know this, but please know your boundaries as students and do not cross them."

The faltering Iris went "Yes" and huddled herself with a stare from Shinomiya-sensei.

Smiling with slight wryness, Maika-san continued.

"Also, this place has a toilet but no bathroom. If you wish to take a bath, please use the hot spring outside."

"Umm... Maika-san, the hot spring outside looks too hot to enter."

I recalled the seething hot spring I had seen along the way and asked Maika-san.

"Don't worry. There is a flow of cold groundwater near this cottage, mixing with the hot spring water to produce an appropriate temperature. But indeed, there are parts with higher temperatures so please do not venture too far away."

"Understood."

Charlotte must have built her cottage at this spot so that she could take baths immediately.

—But still, a hot spring huh?

I could not help but recall what had happened at the volcanic island we visited during the Basilisk campaign.

There was a hot spring on the island too, but Firill had brought all the girls in while I was enjoying a dip, putting me in quite a perilous situation.

I looked at Firill only to meet her gaze by chance. Putting her finger against the corner of her lip suggestively, she smiled. It looked like she was remembering the volcanic island incident too. Most likely, she was hinting to keep what had happened a secret.

"—Thus concludes what you need to know about living here. Going forward, you will remain here on standby until NIFL's inspection ends. They will have to withdraw within a week at most."

Maika-san told us that, seeming quite confident in Charlotte's clout. Then Shinomiya-sensei spoke next.

"Maika and I will be in charge of replenishing living supplies. Also, portable terminals cannot be reached here. Do not move recklessly even if you are curious about the situation outside."

"But what should we do in case of unforeseen circumstances? There is a possibility that you might not come, Shinomiya-sensei."

Raising her hand to ask a question, Lisa showed a worried expression. While entrusting things to Charlotte, it was only natural to worry about unexpected developments.

"In that event, I leave it to all of you to exercise your own judgment. But even if you must verify the situation above ground, please send someone who bears relatively less risk. It is very dangerous for those with colored dragon marks, Shion and Jeanne to be exposed before NIFL."

Sweeping her gaze back and forth over us, Shinomiya-sensei warned solemnly.

"Yes, we will be careful."

Lisa and the rest of us nodded. Shinomiya-sensei turned her gaze to Maika-san.

"Very well. Maika, then let us return to the surface."

"Yes, Charlotte-sama will have her hands full if left to her own devices. We shall depart now, everyone."

Maika-san nodded and bowed her head at us.

The two adults left, leaving us looking at one another.

"What do we do, Mitsuki?"

Firill asked for instructions from Student Body President Mitsuki.

"Yes... We need to first check out the rooms where we will be staying—No, before that, let us decide the sequence we will follow to have our individual discussions with Nii-san."

Mitsuki pondered while she spoke, then proposed what they were going to do next.

"Sure, but how will we decide?"

Agreeing with Mitsuki, Lisa asked her how.

"—Rock-paper-scissors."

Making a fist to indicate 'rock,' Mitsuki answered with a serious face.

Part 5

"—This room looks like it was used for storage."

I, Iris, Jeanne and Shion on her back entered the room on the right assigned to us and checked the interior.

In the living room, Mitsuki and the rest of the girls were playing rock-paper-scissors to determine their order but it was probably going to take a while due to their numbers. Seizing this chance, we checked our room first.

"There are so many boxes of alcoholic beverages and food to go with them."

Seeing the haphazard piles of boxes, Iris remarked.

Realzing how Charlotte spent her time here, I smiled wryly.

"There are also empty audio equipment boxes and video software."

"Captain, there is some mysterious and antiquidated furniture over here."

Jeanne pointed at a dressing table, wardrobe and bookshelves surrounded by cardboard boxes. They looked like expensive items dating back to a bygone era no matter what.

"This probably belongs to the principal too?"

Iris looked at the dressing table with interest. Clean and tidy, it looked like it was properly maintained. The mirror reflected Iris' face clearly.

"Probably. Anyway, let's prepare where we're going to sleep but don't move the furniture."

Since this was pretty much Charlotte's secret base, this furniture might be quite important. Although I wanted know why they were kept this deep underground, had they been kept in her private bedroom in the clock tower, this furniture would have been totally wrecked during when Hekatonkheir destroyed the clock tower last time.

"Yes, got it! Then let's move the boxes to the side of the wall."

Iris began to move the randomly placed boxes to the wall, one by one.

"Then I'll do this side. Oh Jeanne, you don't have to help."

I pointed at Jeanne who was carrying Shion on her back. She bowed her head apologetically.

"Captain, sorry..."

To avoid in our way, she moved towards the door.

Iris and I moved the boxes swiftly, opening up a space in the center of the room.

"—This should be enough for four people to sleep."

We got the job done rapidly because many of the boxes were empty.

"Mononobe! Come over here!"

Iris called to me. What happened? I looked back to see Iris staring at a dressing table drawer.

"Hey, it's not right to open without permission."

I warned her and walked over. Iris shook her head frantically.

"I-I didn't do it on purpose! My clothing got caught so I opened it by accident. Then I saw this inside—"

I followed Iris' gaze to see the drawer glittering with dazzling light from gemstones and jewelry.

"T-This is amazing."

I held my breath in surprise.

"Captain, what's the matter?"

Seeing how we were reacting, Jeanne came over in interest and looked at the drawer.

"—These look like jewelry for formal dresses. The gems are all real... The precious metals also show exquisite craftsmanship. Undoubtedly, they must be very expensive."

In possession of excellent eyes, Jeanne was very confident in appraisals. Impressed with the goods, she asserted.

If Charlotte owned this stuff, it was possible that she used to dress herself up glamorously in front of this dressing table. I had only seen her in a lab coat. Wearing a dress, she probably would look as adorable as a real fairy.

"Hmm...?"

Then I noticed something inside a photo frame in the drawer. I opened the drawer slightly more, exposing the black and white photograph in the frame.

"Wow, so cute! This must be the principal in the past! And this one's probably her father!"

Looking at the photo, Iris showed excitement in her voice.

On the photo was a young Charlotte sitting in a chair with a prim countenance with a man in his prime standing on the side. Just as Iris described, it looked a commemorative photo of father and daughter.

"What!?"

However, I was more concerned about the man's face in the photo than Charlotte in her younger days.

"No way..."

Jeanne stared at the photo in shock too.

If Jeanne thought so in addition to me, then there must be no mistake.

The man in the photo looked older and displayed a different expression and vibe, but his face was extremely similar to Major Loki's.

"Mononobe? Jeanne-chan? What's wrong?"

Iris asked in puzzlement.

"Nothing... He just looks so similar to someone we know, so it's a bit surprising."

Pointing at the man in the photo, I replied in a stiff voice.

"Eh, probably a coincidence. But that's quite surprising. That person must be the principal's relative, I guess?"

Iris cheerfully brought up her ideas but Jeanne and I simply exchanged looks.

"Jeanne, what's your view?"

"...I do not know. However—I personally feel disinclined to treat this as coincidence."

Jeanne shook her head with a troubled look.

Indeed, it was impossible to reach a conclusion through this photo alone. I could only make a direct inquirty with the parties in question—Charlotte and Major Loki.

Having spent a week together with Charlotte, I now regretted not asking her more about herself. Back when she brought up her abilities as the "Gray" Vampire, she did not reveal that her father was the previous dragon until I asked. She probably did not want others to broach the subject of her family and upbringing.

Knock knock.

While Jeanne and I remained silent and Iris was inclining her head in puzzlement, knocking came at the door.

"Oh, I'll get it."

Stopping me who was moving on reflex, Iris walked to the door. She was probably thinking of the fact that I should not touch the other girls carelessly.

Iris turned the handle with a creak and opened the door. Standing at the doorway was a slightly apprehensive Mitsuki.

"According to the results of rock-paper-scissors, the sequence of individual discussions with Nii-san has been decided. I am first."

"I see! You're so good at rock-paper-scissors, Mitsuki-chan!"

Iris' non sequitur of a reaction caused Mitsuki to smile wryly.

"No, the sequence was not based on the ranking of winners. Instead, the winners got to select their spot in the sequence and I simply ended up first. Many of them wished for a later spot because they wanted more time to think."

Hearing this, I felt a bit worried so I asked Mitsuki.

"Is that okay, Mitsuki? You just heard the risks in transformation, right? Don't force yourself if you still haven't organized your thoughts—"

"Please do not worry. I have prepared myself properly since a very long time ago. If possible, I would like to talk to you immediately, Nii-san. Is that alright with you?"

However, Mitsuki interrupted me and smiled with conviction. Seeing her expression, I realized that I was the probably the one who needed resolve.

"...Sure. But where should we talk? Here or in your room, Mitsuki?"

There were limited places where we could be alone. It was not possible to have a private conversation in the living room. On the other hand, the outside of the cottage was like a steam cooker and not really a place to have an unhurried conversation.

Nevertheless, Mitsuki suggested an option I had ruled out.

"Well then, let us go outside."

"Huh? But—"

Seeing me look lost, Mitsuki seemed to read my mind. She nodded and said:

"Standing around normally to talk would not work, of course, but it will be fine if we remove our clothing."

"By removing our clothing, you mean..."

Realizing what Mitsuki wanted to say, I felt my heart pounding nonstop.

Mitsuki blushed with scarlet cheeks and looked suggestively at Iris.

"...Nii-san, did you not take a bath together with Iris-san? Then is there any reason why you cannot do the same with me?"

Mitsuki lowered her voice and whispered to me with a sulking expression.

It looked like Iris had told Mitsuki about taking a bath with me in the principal's room. Just as I was feeling anxious that she was surely angry, Mitsuki did not pursue the matter any further. Instead. she stared at me, blushing intensely.

"Nii-san... Please bathe together, with me."

A wish requested by my younger sister in a shy and feeble voice—Unable to refuse, I nodded.

Part 6

Ultimately lacking the courage to undress in our rooms and burst out into the living room while wrapped in a towel, Mitsuki and I exited the cottage in our uniforms first.

Then undressing behind a different rock respectively, we put on a bath towel and met up. Since we could not touch yet, we stayed at a distance beyond arm's reach.

"I-It is more embarrassing than I thought. Hurry and enter the water."

Applying pressure to her bath towel, Mitsuki dipped her foot into the steaming natural hot spring. Due to the cloudiness of the hot spring water, her body was almost invisible after she waded in up to her shoulders.

Relaxing slightly, Mitsuki extended her hand and waved to hurry me.

"Please come quickly, Nii-san. If we do not enter the water at the same time, I will be the first to faint from staying in the bath too long."

"Oh, okay."

Feeling a slightly different kind of embarrassment as bathing with Iris, I entered the hot spring too.

The water was shallower than I thought and hotter than the bath water in Charlotte's room. There was a slippery feeling that you can only find in water at the source.

"It feels like this hot spring water is very good for the skin."

Mitsuki raised her arm, stroking with her finger the pale skin that almost seemed to meld with the hot spring water.

"Yeah, it's different from last time's—"

Accidentally bringing up the hot spring at the volcanic island, I frantically stopped myself.

"Last time's?"

"Oh, no... mm, we went to a hot spring when we went traveling as a family in our childhood, right? I just remembered from that time."

Left without a choice, I lied to Mitsuki. She nodded with comprehension.

"—Speaking of which, that did happen. Back then, I could not travel by car, I was so obstinate and spoiled... In the end, we had to get there by switching between many trains. I caused so much trouble for your family, Nii-san."

Mitsuki reminisced in a whisper.

Although I was looking for an excuse, I did remember about the hot spring trip. I could not recall it earlier, but after Tia released Yggdrasil's curse, my memories would now surface naturally in my mind.

"But even so, it was still quite fun, right? I was very excited to ride all kinds of trains. The lunchboxes at the train stations were quite tasty. Well, I suppose Mom and Dad were quite exhausted."

I smiled wryly and recounted my memories.

Mitsuki's refusal to ride cars had started after losing her family to the traffic accident. It was fine during elementary school but when we were going to the hot spring, she could not even take a bus.

"Yes. To be honest, I was very happy too. To have another family outing like that again—"

Agreeing with me, Mitsuki made a helpless look mid-sentence.

She had realized that this wish could not come true if she were to be barred from leaving Midgard for the rest of her life.

"Mitsuki..."

I said with worry but she shook her head to indicate she was fine.

"Three years ago... when I outed myself as a D so that I could meet you, I had already resolved myself to abandon the life I have led till then."

Looking straight at me, Mitsuki said decisively. She did not seem like she was lying. However, there was one fact here that could not be overlooked.

"—Mitsuki, you've still kept your house beside my home."

"Y-Yes."

Slightly startled, Mitsuki nodded.

During our return to Nanato City, I had seen Mitsuki's old home that was now partially used for storage. Back when we were only childhood friends, Mitsuki's room was facing mine, allowing us to talk just by opening our windows.

"You haven't sold the house. Isn't that because you have some kind of dream? You won't be able to make that dream come true unless you return to Nanato City, right?"

Mitsuki had mentioned a dream when tidying up the rooms with Lisa and the others. Hence, our discussion could not continue until this point was clarified.

"...That is... a secret... I cannot reveal."

Mitsuki looked very shy, even dipping her mouth into the hot spring.

"But I might be taking that dream away. I need to know my responsibility accordingly."

I spoke forcefully. Soaked in the hot spring, Mitsuki blew bubbles then lifted her head with determination.

"—Nii-san, you must not laugh, okay?"

Mitsuki felt quite embarrassed about it? She confirmed with a blushing face.

"Okay, I promise not to laugh."

"Then I shall tell you... I-In the future, if I were to get married to you, Nii-san... I wish to live there. U-Umm, if our family increased in size, it would be like housing for two generations... U-Umm... S-Sorry!"

Blushing red to her ears while she spoke, Mitsuki could bear it no longer and submerged the bottom half of her face into the hot spring.

"No, umm... You don't need to apologize..."

My face also heated up due to hearing Mitsuki's unexpected words.

"....."

Blowing bubbles with her face in the water, Mitsuki seemed to be murmuring something with her eyes lowered. She was probably still apologizing.

While we continued to gaze at each other, this itchy silence persisted for a while. However, with her noise in the water, Mitsuki's breath ran out. With a blushing face, she emerged from the hot spring.

"Umm... I am aware that bringing up the topic of marriage under these circumstances would force you to feel responsible on a different level, Nii-san. That is why must apologize after all."

"No—I'm the one who has to apologize. I've clearly remembered our childhood promise... but I've kept delaying my answer."

To my childhood self, Mitsuki had been more important than anyone and we made a marriage promise. But due to my deal with Yggdrasil, I had forgotten the promise and fallen in love with Iris.

Having recovered my memories now, both feelings occupied my heart, clashing with each other.

Until recently, Mitsuki and Iris had been yielding to each other, but that was also why I could not reach a decision.

Due to this sense of guilt, I looked away from Mitsuki. Maintaining her distance, Mitsuki moved and met my gaze once again.

"Nii-san, please do not show such a pained expression on your face. This topic... let us shelve it for now. Just as Shinomiya-sensei and Maika-san said, whether we make contact with you or not is merely a matter of weighing risks, Nii-san."

Smiling wryly, Mitsuki brought us back to the main topic.

"And to me, this is a matter of responsibility... Right?"

"Indeed."

Mitsuki noded then continued in a firm tone of voice.

"The fact that you changed us, Nii-san, isn't that tormenting you? I would rather not make contact with you if it would force you to shoulder many burdens, Nii-san. To me, the greatest risk is whether you feel tormented by this."

Compared to losing the dream she had just mentioned, Mitsuki was more concerned for my feelings.

These intense thoughts and feelings made my chest feel tight. I clenched my fist.

Now our positions were reversed. I was clearly the one who had put Mitsuki and the others in danger. It would be absurd if she had to worry about me instead. Right now, I was a failure whether as her childhood friend or older brother. And to Mitsuki, I was the fiance she was engaged to.

How could a man in such a position be unreliable?

"In that case, there's nothing for you to worry about."

Looking into Mitsuki's eyes, I declared firmly.

"Nii-san..."

"If you or anyone else face problems arising from touching me, then I will be the one to handle them. This is my responsibility. But it's not something I do unwillingly. This is how I feel."

This was not acting tough. Instead, this feeling came from the bottom of my heart.

"But that would be too much of a burden for you, Nii-san—"

"You're wrong. I don't find this a burden. Rather, it would be burden if you felt troubled but I could do nothing about it."

I spoke over Mitsuki and conveyed to her the fact that we were thinking alike.

"In that case, there is already... nothing to agonize over."

Smiling wryly, Mitsuki used her finger to wipe the corners of her eyes. I did not know whether it was condensation or sweat. Perhaps they were tears from Mitsuki's eyes.

"I want to become the same kind of being as you, Nii-san, to walk along the same path. The dream I just mentioned would have no meaning at all without you, Nii-san. So please—Change me."

Mitsuki spoke with eyes of determination.

"Yes."

I replied. Pushing through the hot water, I approached Mitsuki.

"Oh—Wait, please hold on!"

But when I reached out, Mitsuki suddenly stopped me.

"Umm... This is an extremely special act for us... like a ritual. Hence, rather than a simple touch, umm..."

Fidgeting, Mitsuki turned her back to me and pushed aside the hair behind her. On her pale and exposed neck, the blue dragon mark was glowing.

"Could you use your lips for contact?"

Mitsuki spoke her wish quietly. She seemed quite embarrassed and her pale skin went red in an instant. My heart also started to pound and my mind blanked out.

"Use my lips... So a kiss, you mean?"

Wavering, I asked the obvious.

"Y-Yes—Uh, oh, n-no! Not mouth to mouth, I mean the dragon mark! It would be very romantic if you could turn me into my new self with a kiss... It would become a precious memory..."

Frantically, Mitsuki explained, pointing to the dragon mark on her neck.

"S-So that's what you mean..."

I felt slightly relieved, but immediately froze when I imagined myself kissing the back of Mitsuki's neck.

In a certain way, this was even more embarrassing than an ordinary kiss. However, Mitsuki kept her hair lifted, waiting for me.

Having made such a strong declaration earlier, I could not falter here and cause Mitsuki to worry.

"—I got it."

Answering in a forceful tone as though to convince myself, I approached Mitsuki's back.

While closing in, I could smell the sweet fragrance coming from Mitsuki's skin, a refreshing scent. Decorated with beads of sweat, Mitsuki's skin had turned pink from nervousness and the heat.

The blue dragon mark gave off greater brilliance. As though in response, the dragon mark on my left hand glowed faintly.

"Okay, here I go."

Gulping, I mustered my determination. Hesitation would only make both sides feel more embarrassed. Do it in one go.

"...Yes, I am counting on you, Nii-san."

Mitsuki steadied herself and waited for my kiss.

Bringing my face against the back of Mitsuki's neck, I touched the blue dragon mark with my lips.

"Mm..."

Mitsuki's body suddenly shuddered and a small moan escaped from her lips. In that instant, blue light was released from the dragon mark, enveloping her entire body.

"—Kuh... Ahhh!!"

Hugging herself tightly, Mitsuki moaned.

"Are you okay, Mitsuki!?"

Speaking of which, I had not witnessed the instant of Iris and Shion's transformations. This was my first time seeing the change after contact with my own eyes.

Mixed in the blue light were black particles, most likely Mitsuki's dark matter. Charlotte had said before that chances were very high that a D's own dark matter was what the dragonification process used. Then right now, Mitsuki's body was being remodeled using dark matter.

"D-Do not worry... It, does, not, hurt."

Despite the look of hardship on her face, that was how Mitsuki replied. The blue light slowly dimmed while at the same time, Mitsuki's expression also gradually grew gentle.

Then the light vanished completely. Exhausted, Mitsuki collapsed.

"Mitsuki!"

Seeing Mitsuki about to sink into the hot spring, I hastily caught her in my arms. Her body temperature felt quite elevated, but I could not see any external changes.

"Nii-san..."

Mitsuki opened her eyes slightly and held my hand.

"Are you really okay? You looked like it was really painful—"

"I am fine. It did not hurt. How should I describe it...? Umm, rather, it was too pleasurable... To avoid making strange noises, I had to endure desperately."

Mitsuki avoided eye contact shyly while she talked about the transformation just now.

"T-That's good to hear... I guess?"

Unsure how to react, I concurred ambiguously.

"P-Please stop asking me! However... With this, I can finally touch you, Nii-san."

Despite still avoiding eye contact, Mitsuki gripped even more tightly to prevent my hand from leaving her.

"...I see."

I gripped Mitsuki's hand firmly in turn, but noticing that we were clad in nothing but bath towels, I did not know where to look.

"Mitsuki, it's time... we got out, right?"

I suggested since this would be embarrassing for Mitsuki too if this continued. However, Mitsuki shook her head lightly.

"I would like us to stay like this for a while."

"...You'll faint, you know?"

"If that were to happen, please carry me back to the room, Nii-san. After all, I will be sleeping in the same room as you, Iris-san and the others."

Mitsuki spoke in a slightly coddled voice, resting her head against my chest. The body warmth and softness of her skin were making my heart race but I also felt a nostalgic sense of reassurance. I sighed.

"Just a little longer in the bath, okay?"

Despite noticing that I also wanted to stay like this longer, in order to maintain my pride as the older brother, I answered in an exasperated tone of voice.

Part 7

"...So what did you two do outside?"

As soon as Mitsuki and I returned to the cottage and stepped into the living room, Firill immediately stared at us.

Almost fainting from staying too long in the bath, Mitsuki was holding onto my arm to support herself.

Her face was bright red with slightly irregular breathing. One could not explain this as simply from being outside. From the instant we were seen intimately pressed together, Mitsuki's decision was obvious. Surely, what Firill wanted to hear about was what kind of discussion we had.

"Uh, umm..."

I looked at the everyone without answering. Inside the living room were three of the girls, Firill, Lisa and Ren. The rest of them were in their respective rooms.

"Nii-san..."

Mitsuki was still hazy, rubbing her cheek against my shoulder in full affectionate mode.

Seeing Mitsuki acting in this manner, Lisa stood up forcefully from the sofa and glared at me.

"D-Don't tell me that going with the flow from the momentum of becoming mates—Y-You two crossed that line!?"

"...That line?"

Operating her terminal in a corner of the room, Ren looked up and tilted her head in puzzlement.

"N-No! It was very hot outside so all we did was have a chat while taking a dip in the hot spring!"

Judging that misunderstandings would arise if this continued, I revealed the truth. But as one would expect, the girls' gazes did not calm down.

"Ehh... Naked socializing."

Firill pouted and murmured unhappily.

"Don't use such a weird description!"

"But it is the truth."

I demanded a correction, but Lisa's icy tone silenced my objections.

"Urgh..."

Plunged into a hopeless situation, I found a helping hand extended to me from an unexpected place.

"—Lisa and Firill have no right to criticize others."

Speaking quietly was Ren, operating her portable terminal.

"You two... took a bath together with Onii-chan at his home before."

Saying that, Ren showed us the screen of her terminal.

Taken from a distance, it was a bit blurry, but the picture depicted the scene of Tia, Firill, Lisa and me together in a bath at my parent's house in Nanato City, with Mitsuki scolding us.

"What... When did you take that—No, th-there were actually complicated reasons—"

Lisa's face reached boiling point all at once. Stammering, her voice grew quieter and quieter.

"No way, I can't believe you took a photo back then..."

Firill murmured in shock but she immediately ran over to Ren's side with a grin.

"Hey hey, Ren, could you let me have a better look? Oh... Too bad, everyone covered up the important parts."

Firill looked like she was hoping for something, but slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

"...If anything weird was captured, I wouldn't keep it."

Slightly going red, Ren answered stiffly.

"I wanted to use it as reference material... But it's still very interesting. Can you send it to my terminal?"

"Mm."

Ren nodded and started to transmit data to Firill. During this time, Lisa finally recovered and scolded Firill and Ren with her face red.

"Please do not spread this kind of photo! By the way, Firill-san, you are next to have your discussion with Mononobe Yuu. Have you made your decision?"

Lisa asked, prompting Firill to ponder with her arms crossed.

"Hmm... If we're gong to talk, I'd like to have a lovey-dovey discussion in the hot spring too."

Hearing this, Mitsuki slowly looked up from leaning against me.

"I... was not... acting lovey-dovey with Nii-san."

"Mitsuki-san... It is completely unconvincing when you speak from such a posture."

Lisa sighed in exasperation.

Deciding that things were moving towards a bad situation at this rate, I hastily interjected.

"Hold on, Firill. I won't be able to take two baths in row. I'm already about to faint."

"Eh... Mononobe-kun, you have to do your best."

Firill pouted disapprovingly. Then Ren spoke up.

"Me too... I want to soak in the hot spring with Onii-chan."

"Ren too..."

I scratched my head, wondering what to do.

"In that case, we'll just have to control the times and take turns to bathe in sequence, right? For two people to have an unhurried discussion, the hot spring outside is indeed the best choice."

Unable to watch any longer, Lisa suggested. True, my body should be able to endure it in that case. But before that, I was thinking that having discussions during a hot spring bath was in itself—

"S-So, Mononobe-kun, we will enjoy the hot spring together tomorrow morning."

With a commanding demeanor, Firill decided a date for us on her own.

"I'm fine with the daytime tomorrow."

Hearing Ren's matter-of-fact voice, I slumped my shoulders in resignation.

"Fine... Let's talk while in the bath."

After I answered, everyone's gaze gathered on Lisa.

"A-As for me, I don't need..."

Lisa stammered with her face red.

"Fufu, Lisa, are you fine with not enjoying the hot spring together with Mononobe-kun?"

A little malevolently, Firill smiled and asked Lisa.

"Umm... A-According to the current sequence, my turn will take place tomorrow night. Then Tia-san and the others will have to wait a long time. Th-Therefore..."

Lisa paused and pondered in a dilemma. But soon, she seemed to find a flash of inspiration and looked up.

"Oh right—we will simply have a foot bath!"

"Oh, a foot bath?"

I was quite puzzled by this completely unexpected suggestion.

"This type of bath exists in Japan too, I read about it in a magazine once. This would also reduce the strain on Mononobe Yuu. As for the matter of sequence, may I skip ahead and insert my discussion with him between Firill-san and Ren-san's baths?"

With an expression confident that this was an excellent proposal, Lisa confirmed with Firill and Ren.

"I don't mind... But Lisa, you're so impatient."

"Mm."

Firill and Ren looked impressed about something while accepting the proposal.

"I-I am certainly not impatient. I am simply being considerate for his health! Mononobe Yuu—Do you accept too?"

Finally, Lisa looked at me.

"Oh, sure..."

By this point, there was no room for objects. I nodded at my wit's end.

Thus, my discussions with Firill and the others were left for the next day. Underground, we welcomed the arrival of night.

It was quite helpful to gain some time to settle and organize my feelings. I felt relieved—It never occurred to me at that moment that there existed a certain character who would disregard prior agreements.

Chapter 3 - Future Contract

Part 1

My body was hurting all over. The taste of blood was hanging in my mouth.

The pungent odor of gasoline rushed at my nose.

"Ugh..."

I groaned and opened my eyes but could not see anything. Everything had plunged into darkness. I could not even make out the outline of my own arm.

Until just now, I had been riding a car.

At the time, I was chatting with Mitsuki next to me, about the camping we were doing next.

But suddenly, the surroundings turned dark and the world became upside down. I heard Mitsuki's scream—

"Mitsuki!"

I instantly called to her beside me. But no one answered.

"Uncle, Auntie!"

I called ot Mitsuki's parents at the driver's and front passenger's seats, but there was no reply.

"Mitsuki, are you there!?"

I searched my surroundings by touch. I felt the seats and the sensation of broken glass on my fingertips.

"—"

My fingertip was cut, probably by the broken glass.

But I mustered my courage again and reached out.

This time, my fingertips touched something soft and warm. This was human skin—someone's arm.

Because it was quite slender, I was convinced it was Mitsuki's arm.

"Mitsuki! Are you okay!?"

I tried to move in the darkness to confirm her condition. Along the way, I heard an annoying creaking. I knew that we were currently tilting.

The car was in an unstable position right now. Sensing the danger, I stopped.

But while waiting for the noise to subside, my consciousness and senses were getting more and more hazy.

I had just touched Mitsuki earlier but now I did not know where she was. Due to stopping my movements, my own existence started to feel ambiguous.

Swallowed—by darkness. Everything was repainted black, disappearing.

Realizing these fears, I reached out again even at the risk of disrupting the car's balance.

However, my hand missed her because my posture had changed.

"Mitsuki!!"

Calling her name, not caring even if my fingers got cut, I continued to search my surroundings with my hands.

I needed light. Just a little bit... A weak light to illuminate Mitsuki's position.

—Throb.

My left hand pulsated. Beginning from inside the skin, my hand felt hot like it was being scorched by fire.

The instant I cried out in pain, a flash of light filled the world—

"—Time to wake up, Yuu."

Feeling a sudden chill along my spine, I was jolted back to reality from my dream.

"!!"

A flash of silver approached me in the darkness. I instantly raised my right arm. Transmuting a steel knife from dark matter instantly, I blocked the attack.

Clang, a sharp metallic impact sounded through the darkness.

"Good morning. Nothing less expected from my mate."

Smiling with satisfaction while maintaining the posture of her downward swinging knife, it was Kili in pajamas.

On top of me, she was gazing down at me.

Why was Kili here...?

While resisting Kili's weapon, I tried hard to assess the situation.

This was Charlotte's cottage in Midgard's underground. I was sleeping in this room with Iris, Mitsuki, Jeanne and Shion.

With only a night light, the room's interior was dim. I could hear the breathing sounds of the girls in their sleep.

"Yuu, don't move yet, okay? We still need to make physical contact."

Kili smiled seductively and stopped me from moving.

I took a closer look and saw that Kili had taken a posture over me while avoiding physical contact. The dragon mark on her right hand was still glowing with blue light.

"What are you planning... to do?"

"This is the easiest way to wake you up."

Kili withdrew the blade without any remorse at all.

"What would you do if I didn't react?"

"In that case, you'd wake from the pain? Wounds can be healed using biogenic transmutation, so there's no problem."

"...There's already a problem when it hurts."

I sighed with undisguised exasperation in response to Kili cheerfully speaking of the absurd.

"Really? Pain can sometimes turn into pleasure. When you stabbed me here in the past—I felt extremely thrilled, you know?"

Holding her abdomen, Kili waxed nostalgically.

"...That pain made me understand. The dragon who should become my mate is you."

Saying that, Kili slowly drew near my face.

"H-Hey, don't tell me you're going to, right here—"

I instantly looked at Iris and the others who were sleeping on the side.

"Don't worry... No one will get up. Before sneaking into the room, I transmuted a gas and released it into the room to make them sleep more soundly. That was also why a little stimulation was necessary to wake you up."

Kili smiled while describing her prank.

"Behave yourself... Didn't you girls decide the order using rock-paper-scissors?"

"Yes—But I couldn't wait any longer."

With our noses about to touch, Kili looked at me passionately.

"You might not be allowed out of Midgard ever again if you touch me, you know?"

Kili looked like she had decided to become my mate. However, I was worried whether she truly understood the risks involved.

"Given my position, my freedom of movement will be restricted no matter which I choose. If I want to leave, I'll just resort to force. I'm not obliged to follow rules set by other people."

Smiling fearlessly, Kili replied very much in her style, but I could not approve.

"Doing whatever you like..."

"You won't allow it? Then you'd better discipline me properly and never take your eyes off me. Use that power to make me utterly yours."

Seeing me fuming, she grinned happily and began to close the final distance.

Clearly capable of blocking the acute attack of her blade earlier, I did not react at all to her slowly approaching lips.

The reason was most likely because she was showing no killing intent. Conveyed through her gaze up close were strong feelings of desire for me. That was probably something one would call affection or love.

The light erupting from Kili's dragon mark enveloped her then dissipated as tiny particles.

"Mm..."

Pressing her lips forcefully against me, Kili looked up when the light vanished.

"Oh my—That's all? It's less interesting than I expected."

Feeling slightly disappointed, Kili checked her own body. Compared to Mitsuki's transformation, her reaction was much milder... This was probably a difference in constitution.

"Okay, get off now."

Although unsettled by the sensation lingering on my lips, I still feigned calmness and spoke. I felt strongly against showing weakness in front of Kili.

However, Kili did not change her posture on top of me. This time, she simply pushed herself down as though trying to cover my entire body.

Making contact with her supple and warm body, I felt my heart racing rapidly.

"Seriously, what are you talking about? Here comes the main event as promised."

"M-Main event?"

Unable to understand, I repeated her words in a question. Kili revealed a gorgeous smile.

"After becoming mates, there's only one thing left to do. Let's make a baby—Yuu."

"Uh... W-Wait!"

"I'm not going to wait."

Ignoring me, Kili switched to a straddling posture and began to unbutton her pajamas.

"H-Hey!"

Her exposed skin was almost halting my ability to think. But instantly recalling Iris and the other girls sleeping on the side, I reached out to stop Kili.

"Fufu, you're surprisingly aggressive."

However, Kili immediately grabbed my hand and pressed it against her chest.

Sinking into Kili's soft breast, the intense sensation transmitted through my hand was blanking out my mind.

"Mmm—Go ahead... You can do whatever you wish."

Exhaling hot breath, Kili stared at me with moistened eyes.

My thoughts, already blanked out, were swallowed by the impulse of basic instinct.

"Let's do it, Yuu, *to safeguard our future*."

Kili drew her face near again.

It was a kiss with a different meaning than before. Rather than contact for becoming mates, this was an act for exchanging love.

"Wait—"

"I'm sorry but I can't allow you two to continue."

The instant before Kili could kiss with her lips and ignore me, a sharp voice sounded in the room.

"What..."

Kili turned around in surprise. I gasped and looked in the same direction, only to see Ariella standing at the doorway.

"I could overlook the violation of sequence, but anything beyond that won't be allowed. Ren might cry."

Smiling wryly, Ariella glared sharply at Kili.

"When did you... No, forget that. Don't disturb us at the critical part."

Recovering from her surprise, Kili glared back reproachfully at Ariella.

"I said I won't allow anything more, didn't I? If you must continue no matter what, I will stop you by force."

Ariella spoke casually and naturally readied her stance. In my mind, I marveled in surprise at Ariella's intense killing intent.

Although I knew she was trained in combat skills, I never expected this level of—

Giving off "that type of aura," simply by standing there, Ariella was exerting pressure that would cause others to get goosebumps.

"...Looks like you're serious. But do you think you can defeat me?"

Kili seemed to notice Ariella was no ordinary person, but she still answered forcefully in full confidence.

"Indeed, but even if I lost, Tia will wake up in the ensuing commotion. If that happens, it's not your win either."

"..."

Ariella's response brought a frown to Kili's face. Once Tia with her ability to interfere with dark matter was involved, Kili's prided "Muspelheim" and biogenic transmutation would be sealed. She must have realized it.

"...Fine. That's it for today. I'll hold back for now."

Deciding that prolonging the dispute would be pointless, Kili shrugged and stood up.

"But I intend to do it properly with you later—Prepare yourself, Yuu."

Leaving these words behind, Kili leisurely left the room with the front of her pajamas still unfastened.

"That was close, Mononobe-kun."

After making sure Kili had left, Ariella smiled wryly at me.

"Y-Yeah... Thanks a lot, but when did you—"

"It was just now. Noticing Kili was missing, I wondered if she might be... So I came to have a look. Just as I said earlier, I don't care if she's simply violating the sequence... B-But she looked like she was going to go further... Unless I stopped her."

Explaining with a blush, Ariella coughed lightly and stared at me.

"But if you wish, Mononobe-kun, I'll keep quiet, okay? With Mitsuki and the others on the side, I hope you won't give in to momentary impulse."

"...What an embarrassment."

I sat on my blankets formally in seiza and hunched my shoulders. Ariella sighed with exasperation.

"You have to be more careful. You are Ren's 'Onii-chan' after all."

It sounded like scolding but there was pleading in her voice.

Ariella stared at me seriously for a while then continued hesitantly.

"I believe Ren will surely choose to have contact with you. I hope... You can become Ren's true family. Unlike Miyazawa Kenya, the most awful father—Okay?"

Saying that, Ariella left the room without hearing my reply.

"Ariella...?"

She had always cared for Ren but something felt off in the way she phrased things as though excluding herself.

However, unable to chase Ariella for answers because she had gone back to her room where there were other girls, I could only frown on my own in the darkness of my room.

Part 2

Early next morning. Since we were underground, there was no concrete feeling of morning's arrival. The time displayed on my terminal was 6am.

I got up earlier than everyone else and waited for Firill at the hot spring outside.

"Hoo..."

Soaking myself in the warm water, my eyelids naturally felt heavier and I yawned.

Totally sleep deprived. Due to Kili making me especially awake last night, it took me a long time to fall asleep again.

"Thanks for waiting, Mononobe-kun."

While I was spacing out, I heard Firill's voice from behind.

"Oh, Firill? Good morning."

I made myself sober while turning around, but then I froze.

Approaching me was Firill, dressed in an extremely skimpy white swimsuit. It was far more revealing than being wrapped in a bath towel. With every step she took, her massive bosom would wobble.

"What..."

I suddenly stood up in the hot spring due to excessive surprise. Firill stopped by the water's edge, facing me.

"What's the matter? Does this... look good?"

In my current state, I would be almost fully exposing myself to Firill if I turned around. My chest went without saying, but with only a small cloth over my crotch, it was equivalent to being fully nude.

"I-It looks great on you—But why a swimsuit..."

It was the truth that Firill was very attractive in a swimsuit but why was she wearing one?

"I was expecting something like this as a possibility."

Firill puffed her chest out proudly and made a victory sign towards me with her hand.

"What kind of situation did you imagine...?"

Unsure where to look, I sighed, but seeing the glowing blue dragon mark on her left shoulder, I was reminded of our original purpose.

Although she was very cheerful, I would expect her, being a princess from the Principality of Erlia, to be quite troubled by the risks of transformation.

"Well... Let's talk first. Your position is the most complicated, Firill. No need to hurry, just think carefully first—"

"Mononobe-kun. Stand there with your arms spread out."

However, Firill interrupted my suggestion and made a request.

"...Spread my arms? Like this?"

I had no idea what was the purpose but I spread my arms as told.

"Yes, that's right, then... Don't move, okay?"

Firill continued to give instructions then back away slightly. It was almost like she was preparing a running start.

"H-Hey, don't tell me—"

I yelled frantically but Firill simply ran straight for me.

"Here I come... Mononobe-kun."

With her massive bosom bouncing while she ran, Firill took a giant leap into the hot spring.

"Tyah—"

Firill dove fiercely, straight into me with my outstretched arms.

"Wait—"

Flying over, although her body was stopped by me, the impact was not absorbed completely. With a massive splash, I fell backwards into the hot spring.

Held in my arms, her supple body was heating up. Within the cloudy hot spring water, I could glimpse faint blue light.

"...Bwah!!"

Holding Firill, I finally managed to stick my head out of the water, but her transformation was already complete. The blue glow of her dragon mark had vanished.

"Fufu... Mononobe-kun, with this, you've now become my prince."

Hugging me with her arms around the back of my neck, Firill smiled with a blush. My heart was racing from the intimate physical contact with her body, but more than that, I felt anxious and troubled.

"F-Firill—Why did you do that...? Before making me your prince, it's possible you can no longer be a princess, you know?"

"You mean... the matter of risks? About not being able to leave Midgard?"

Hugging me tightly, Firill tilted her head slightly.

"—That's right."

I felt uneasy that I had deprived Firill of her wish and position, but Firill nodded cheerfully.

"Indeed, according to the current rules... That might happen. However, if that really were to pass, I have no intention of giving up on being a princess either. Because without my position as royalty, I can't get legally married to all of you."

"Huh...?"

What on earth was she talking about? I was rendered speechless.

"Oh? Didn't I mention before? The Principality of Erlia allows same-sex marriage. And polygamy is permitted for royalty alone."

"No, *that* I remember but..."

Despite noticing that my issue was not with that, Firill still continued seriously.

"It's already decided that you'll become my prince, Mononobe-kun. But you've marked others too, haven't you? Hence, all of you will get married to me... thus becoming Mononobe-kun's family, a perfect solution."

"What an ingenious idea" was what Firill's tone of voice seemed to imply, but at this moment, she smiled slightly mischievously and added a whisper.

"Well... I will actually be the only one married to Mononobe-kun, but that counts as a perk, right?"

"No, it's not like you can settle things just by calling it a perk..."

I concurred ambiguously due to my doubts, but having noticed that the prior assumption was weird in the first place, I asked Firill in return.

"How should I say this? Although you won't give up on being a princess, what about reality? Are you going break out by force?"

Recalling what Kili had said, I was worried that Firill's outlook might be too naive.

However, Firill sighed at my questions in exasperation.

"Mononobe-kun... Could you think more carefully? I can't be a princess anymore if I did something like that."

"Of course I know that—then what are you going to do...?"

Noticing that Firill was not saying things on whim, I asked about her methods.

"Rules are something thought up by people. Just change them if they don't suit you. That was apparently what my grandfather did."

"What—"

Hearing an unexpected answer, I gasped and focused my mind.

Firill's grandfather, Albert Crest, was a person who had fought strongly for the human rights of Ds, changing Midgard's situation greatly.

I had treated rules as absolute, but from Firill's perspective, knowing her grandfather's great accomplishments well, rules and the world were not impossible to change.

"...I never thought of that solution."

"Mononobe-kun, you must broaden your horizons. You're already my prince."

Firill advised me gently then brought her lips gently against my cheek.

A natural movement with almost no hesitation. It took me a number of seconds before I realized I had been kissed.

"H-Hey..."

"Fufu, Mononobe-kun... Your face is so red."

Firill giggled happily, relaxed her body and leaned against me.

"Ariella warned me, so that's all for today. However.. Before the others wake up, let's get lovey-dovey in a wholesome way. How about that, my prince?"

"I think this is already unwholesome..."

A giant bust pressed directly against me, combined with a girl's sweet fragrance coming from her pale skin...

My mind was getting dizzy, driven by an impulse to embrace her.

"Don't worry, Mononobe-kun. As long as you do nothing at all... It counts as wholesome. Pure and lawful interaction between genders."

Firill whispered to me in delight, stroking my chest with her fingers.

"For the sake of my creative works... Let me carefully research a man's body in great detail. Don't worry."

Her fingers slid from my chest towards my abdomen, then went farther down. I felt my spine gradually going numb.

"Uh—"

It would be bad if this continued. I grabbed Firill's hand and pinned her down to seal her movements.

"Eh... Mononobe... -kun?"

She looked up at me in dumbfounded surprise.

"Firill, you can't go further if you really want to keep things wholesome. Men are not creatures with as much self-control as you might think, Firill."

I stared into Firill's eyes and told her. Slightly flustered, she dodged eye contact.

"B-But... If you want to be unwholesome, Mononobe-kun... I don't mind—"

"Even though you're saying that, do you realize you're shaking?"

I could feel minor trembling from the slender arm I was holding.

"This is... trembling with excitement."

Firill argued with a blush. Seeing her trying to act tough like this, I sighed.

"It's fine even if you don't force yourself. I feel—that just now's kiss was probably your limit, right?"

Having kissed me on the cheek, she seemed a bit subtly high-strung. Her bold behavior was perhaps to hide her embarrassment.

"...Mononobe-kun, you're so bad."

Firill's face went bright red and she looked down. I was evidently right.

"You're the one person I don't want to hear that from."

Sighing deeply again, I released Firill. Liberated, Firill went limp and sat down in the hot spring. Then she adjusted her swimsuit strap that had moved a little out of place.

"Then... I won't be bad anymore. Let's enjoy a dip in the hot spring normally."

"—Got it."

I sat down next to Firill. Under the water, she held my hand.

"Is this within limits?"

"Well... Barely, I guess."

"Then barely will do."

Relaxing a bit, Firill smiled.

"Looks like it's very difficult... for a man to act like a gentleman."

"Yes, so that's why you need to be more careful, Firill."

I urged her to be careful again but Firill smiled profoundly.

"Yes... You're right, but—the way you acted just now, Mononobe-kun, that wasn't so unpleasant either, you know? A forceful prince who's a little scary... I might be okay with that too."

Rather than putting on a brave face, Firill's tone of voice sounded like she truly believed it from the bottom of her heart.

"—You really don't learn your lessons."

I remarked with a wry smile. Had I made Firill awaken a new side to her? My heart filled with trepidation.

Part 3

"...Why are you in a swimsuit too, Lisa?"

After breakfast, wrapped in a towel, I headed to the hot spring for the third time. But waiting for me there, Lisa's attire surprised me.

She was wearing the black bikini I had seen before. Naturally, my eyes were drawn to the deep cleavage between her massive breasts.

"When leaving the dorm, Firill said it would be a good idea to bring swimwear. I never expected to use it this way."

Lisa tossed her long blonde hair and sighed lightly.

"Sure enough, Firill's involved again huh? But anyway, this swimsuit still looks so good on you."

Due to our "couples training" in the past, praise naturally flowed out from within me.

However, Lisa went red and glared at me unhappily.

"Excuse me—'still' would not count as praise when directed to a young woman. Here, you are supposed to say 'even more beautiful than before' even if you must lie."

Not good enough, Lisa shrugged.

"I-I see... But certainly, you're even more attractive than before."

"...Hmph, it's too late to say that now."

Despite saying that, Lisa's voice was trembling slightly.

"But I'm not lying. You're different from before, Lisa—Oh, no way... Did your bust grow?"

I spoke while looking at the voluptuous breasts that were spilling out slightly from the black swimsuit. Her face instantly went bright red.

"W-Where do you think you are looking at!? This isn't praise, it's just sexual harassment!"

Lisa covered her chest and suddenly yelled loudly.

"M-My bad."

"Goodness gracious... I must say something important next, you need to relax. Regardless, take a seat here first. With just your feet soaked in the water, this would be a foot bath, wouldn't it?"

Sitting on the hot spring's edge and submerging her feet, Lisa asked.

"That's right, but I've only done it once before."

It was on a family trip with Mitsuki and my parents. There was a foot bath at the inn where we were staying, but my memories were quite fuzzy. It probably had not been very interesting for my childhood self.

Keeping a meter's distance from Lisa, I sat down on the hot spring's edge.

"Is that so? I thought it would surely be quite commonplace in Japan."

Saying that, Lisa kicked her feet in the hot spring, causing water to splash and fly around.

"Well, it depends on the region, I guess. But—this is surprisingly comfortable."

While soaking in the hot spring with Mitsuki and Firill, my body soon heated up, but like this, we could talk in leisure.

"Yes, the hot spring is a bit hot and it is fairly stuffy in the surroundings... Very warm."

Lisa agreed with me and exhaled comfortably.

Our conversation paused temporarily at this point, leaving only water sounds in the cavern. Noticing that Lisa was in the process of organizing her words, I wait for her to speak and kept quiet.

Knowing what the other person thought just by reading the mood, this was attained through the efforts of trying to become more couple-like.

"—Mononobe Yuu?"

"Yes?"

She called my name and I responded calmly.

"Do... you regret the fact that you marked us?"

Looking at me, Lisa asked as a test.

"Regret huh? I am very sorry for imposing risks on all of you without asking. However... I would've done the same thing to bring back Iris even if I knew things would unfold into the present situation. So rather than regretting or not regretting, it's better to say that I feel that I don't have that right."

Lies could not deceive her. I answered seriously.

"Fufu—That's a response very much in your style. Very well, next question... Would you have done the same if the one in peril had been me rather than Iris-san?"

"Yes."

I was able to answer this question immediately. Even though I could not guarantee that I would be able to do the same thing, if that was the only way, I would have risked everything to do it.

"—Wonderful to hear that from you. In that case, my decision is made."

Lisa smiled with satisfaction and gradually decreased the distance between us.

"Are you sure...?"

Even without hearing a clear answer from her, I knew. Right now, Lisa had made her decision to make physical contact with me.

"Yes, regarding the matter of risk, a conclusion was already reached when I was conversing with Firill-san yesterday. You have heard about it, haven't you?"

Lisa nodded without hesitation.

"Since people are the ones who decide rules, just change them if they don't suit you—That?"

"Indeed, Firill-san and I are in consensus. When illegitimate rules bind us, just oppose them head on. Also..."

Lisa paused and smiled wryly.

"You are not the sole reason why our dragon marks have become colored."

"...What do you mean?"

Believing that all responsibility lay with me, I asked in doubt.

"It would still be plausible to think that Shion-san got caught in the wake next to Iris-san. However, it is somewhat odd that the dragon marks changed color for those of us who were not present at the scene, but none of the Ds at Midgard were affected at all."

"Well, I think it's because of distance..."

Japan and Midgard were quite far away. I believed this was the reason why I had not marked the other Ds, but Lisa disagreed.

"However, it is possible that there are small numbers of undiscovered Ds in Japan with its highest incidence of Ds. Were it simply a factor of distance, the dragon marks of these Ds would also change color and not go unnoticed in their surroundings."

"Now that you mention it... That's definitely possible."

Even if people could live while hiding their powers, concealing the glow of a dragon mark was very difficult. There would also be people who disclosed their identity out of fear for the anomaly.

"In that case, another necessary condition should exist in order for someone's dragon mark to change color. After much thought, I discovered another point of commonality."

"Point of commonality?"

I urged her to continue, but for some reason, Lisa blushed and coughed.

"Ahem—T-That is... to hold affectionate feelings... for you."

"What...?"

Totally not expecting something in that area, I cried out in confusion.

"Mitsuki-san, Iris-san, Firill-san and Kili-san are obvious... Ren-san also opened up to you during the trip to Japan. It is also apparent at a glance that Ariella-san is quite curious about you. As for me... towards you, umm... I-I hold no feelings of dislike."

Lisa spoke quite rapidly, glaring at me with her face red.

"Although it is merely a casual guess... I am certain that I accepted your color by my own volition. Hence... I am responsible too. And regarding the fact that you selected me—I feel sincere joy."

She was almost whispering towards the end, but her words reached my ears without fail.

This was undoubtedly a confession. I felt my heart race and my face burn up.

"Lisa..."

"Oh... I h-have said something bizarre. Regardless, I choose to have contact with you—And that's that! S-So... Although it is very embarrassing... Please do what you have to do."

Lisa was blushing to her ears. Standing up, she faced me with her back.

Then bending over her body that was trembling from nervousness, she lifted her well-shaped bottom towards me.

"Uh... W-What on earth are you doing...?"

Lisa's posture was very erotic, blanking out my mind.

"W-What am I doing... Isn't it obvious from sight? My dragon mark... is on my bottom."

Speaking of which, there was indeed a glow coming from under the black swimsuit. Lisa pushed the swimsuit aside slightly with her fingers, exposing the blue-glowing dragon mark to me.

"Uh..."

However, my gaze was more drawn to Lisa's bottom that had become less covered by fabric.

A hot flow surged from the depths of my body. To suppress it, I gulped.

"N-No, I know where you dragon mark is—What I want to know is why you're putting on that pose..."

"...Why? Isn't it necessary for your mouth to make contact with the dragon mark? That was what Mitsuki-san said you did."

With her bottom facing me, Lisa looked at me in surprise.

"W-Wait, that was just what Mitsuki insisted... Her wish, that's all. Kissing the dragon mark isn't required, you know? Direct contact with any part of the body is fine."

"Huh?"

Lisa stared at me in astonishment.

She must have gotten the wrong idea after listening to Mitsuki.

Already thoroughly red, Lisa's face turned even redder. Facing me, her bottom began to shake.

I hesitated, unsure what to say. In any case, I tried to follow her suggestion first.

"Umm... If that's your plan, Lisa, I'll do it, even the bottom—"

However, these words seemed to be the last straw to break her. With her face burning red, Lisa yelled:

"E-Enough!"

Then she suddenly dove into the hot spring, submerging herself.

She was probably hiding herself out of embarrassment.

"....."

I scratched my cheek, staring at the bubbles rising from the hot water.

But after a very long time, Lisa still did not surface. I began to grow worried.

"H-Hey, Lisa!"

The rising bubbles stopped. I frantically reached out to search the water where she had submerged.

The instant my fingers touched something soft, blue light glowed from within the cloudy hot spring water. Making use of this light, I pulled Lisa up.

"Pwah... Huff... Huff..."

Lisa was almost suffocating. She panted nonstop as soon as she surfaced, face fully red, tears seeping out from the corners of her eyes, but this was probably not solely due to holding her breath for too long.

"Ooh... To think I did something so shameless. I cannot bring myself to face you anymore."

Covering her face with both hands, she slumped her shoulders powerlessly.

"Everyone has misunderstandings some time. Don't be so depressed."

I tried to cheer her up but she shook her head with her face covered.

"Unacceptable! When I made contact with you, that most important moment ended in confusion... Terrible."

The blue light enveloping her had vanished. Compared to Mitsuki's case, the change was much more mild.

"What would you have preferred, Lisa?"

"...A special act sure enough, preferably a kiss. Oh, b-but not confined to the bottom!"

Still red, Lisa added a clarification. Thinking what a "boyfriend" would do at a time like this, I held her hand.

Even if responsibility rested with both sides, I was the one who changed her. Hence, I wanted to fulfill her wish at least.

"Then—Is this okay?"

Enduring feelings of embarrassment, I gently kissed the back of Lisa's hand.

"What... Y-You..."

Lisa looked rather shocked, staring at me with her mouth gaping open.

"I guess it's futile to make up for it after the fact."

Wondering if I did the wrong thing, I smiled wryly and released her hand. However, Lisa shook her head forcefully with a slightly dazed expression.

"N-No... I am extremely... happy. S-So you can do it after all."

Blushing, Lisa turned her face away in a huff.

"Thank goodness, did I finally earn some marks?"

Seeing Lisa slightly cheered up, I exhaled in relief.

"Make no mistake, that was definitely not full marks, got that!?"

Saying that, Lisa held the back of her hand where I had kissed, smiling happily.

I could not help but feel my heart racing at the sight of her face making such an expression. "I'll work on improving," I replied.

Part 4

"The water is nice."

"Mm... Very nice."

"Really...?"

"Mm."

After lunch, Ren and I were soaking in the hot spring side by side, having this sort of brief conversation.

Taking consecutive baths in a hot spring was ultimately a strain. With my mind going dizzy, I could not talk to Ren properly.

However, Ren did not mind. Releasing air into her wet bath towel, she made it expand like a jellyfish.

"What are your thoughts on risk, Ren?"

Although this silent period did not feel uncomfortable, I was afraid no progress would be made if I fainted from soaking for too long, so I brought up the main point.

"...I don't mind. Father's place is no longer somewhere I want to return to."

Ren gripped the bath towel jellyfish tightly and answered resolutely.

"Really...?"

"Mm."

Ren nodded and inflated the shrinking bath towel again.

Ren's father—Miyazawa Kenya—was such a failure as a father that even I hated him too. Ren had directly confronted him in an argument and lost all expectations of her father, declaring all she needed was having me, Ariella and the rest of the girls at her side.

"So... Anyway, let's recover the color of your dragon mark first?"

To reduce the risk during NIFL's coercive inspection, I suggested.

"...Mm."

However, Ren looked hesitation without nodding.

"S-Sorry. This isn't something to decide in a hurry. It must be scary to know you're going to change into something else."

Did I rush her conclusion too much? I hastily added a comment.

However, Ren shook her head.

"I'm... not afraid. Becoming the same as Onii-chan... will surely be reassuring. However—"

She stopped and stared motionlessly at the bath towel jellyfish by her hand.

I waited for her to continue without hurrying her.

"...But if it's just me alone, no. It'd be better together with Onee-chan."

Before long, Ren said softly.

"Ariella too?"

I knew that Ariella was the only one whom Ren called "Onee-chan," so I asked in return.

"Mm."

Ren nodded clearly and pleaded with me seriously.

"Onii-chan, please."

"...Well, Ariella is up next. I can't ignore her own will and touch her by force."

I wanted to accept Ren's requests as much as possible, but this alone was was something I could not promise lightly.

"Mm—Wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Mm. What I'm saying is, if Onee-chan refuses... I want you to convince her, Onii-chan."

Seeing Ren look at me extremely seriously, I

"Convince her... But since this is Ariella's own decision, I don't have the right to say anything—"

"Wrong!"

Ren disagreed in an even stronger voice.

"No, not question of rights. Onii-chan... do you wish for me and Onee-chan to be happy or what?"

"Uh..."

Ren's words made me realize my way of thinking was wrong. Leaving a choice to someone else was giving up responsibility in a way.

Firill and Lisa had searched for solutions on their own regarding the matter of risk and obtained an answer, thus I spontaneously stopped thinking about it. What I was supposed to do afterwards—how to bring happiness to Ren and the others who were facing risks—This was clearly the most important.

"—You're right. Sorry. Can you give me a bit of time to think?"

"Mm."

I apologized and Ren nodded.

Feeling her gaze, I pondered Ren and Ariella's current situation.

Ren would not find happiness by her father's side. She sincerly hoped for me and Ariella to stay by her side. Then for the sake of Ren's happiness, Ariella was essential. But what about Ariella?

As Miyazawa Kenya's adopted daughter, Ariella had him as her only kin. If she did not touch me, Ariella could return to his side after losing her powers at the onset of adulthood.

However, I did not think that Ariella would choose to live with him. Most likely, Miyazawa Kenya would also lose interest in her after losing her powers.

What would Ariella do after that? She had the fortitude to seek her own happiness, but—

'I hope... You can become Ren's true family.'

Ariella's words from last night—the expression on her face at the time—flashed in my mind.

I felt that I must not take my attention off her right now. I must not hand her over to anyone or anything apart from myself, that was what instinct told me.

Slight anxiety was hanging over the depths of my heart. This was a warning sign of intense impulse, what I had felt when Iris was being taken from me.

Ah—Right.

I realized unintentionally.

Lisa had said that it was possibly her own wish that caused her dragon mark to change color. However, I too must have prayed somewhere inside my heart.

To prevent them from being taken away by something else, I wished for their dragon marks to be dyed with my own color.

"Ren, I think I've made a mistake."

"Mm?"

Ren tilted her head slightly at what I said.

"I probably selected all of you through my own will. I want to protect everyone with these hands—I don't want you to be taken away. That's why I made all of you my mates."

I raised my left hand with its glowing dragon mark and stared into Ren's eyes.

"That's surely because I want to bring happiness to you and Ariella... I don't want to hand this task over to anyone—That's why I must tell this to everyone."

While putting my words together, I had already steeled my determination. I reached out to Ren with my left hand.

"I will support you no matter what happens from here on. I absolutely won't allow misfortune to befall you. So, allow me to protect you, Ren."

This was my actual wish. And they were the ones who had made the choice. I should have noticed this sooner.

"Mm..."

Ren's eyes widened in surprise. Then blushing, she held her hands against her chest. That was the location of her dragon mark.

"Will you say... the same words to Onee-chan?"

Looking up at me, Ren asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. Also, I won't give up even if she refuses me. For your sake and mine, I will convince her."

"...Mm."

Ren's stiff demeanor softened and she nodded slightly.

Then her tiny hands held my left hand tightly.

"I trust you, Onii-chan."

Our dragon marks glowed as blue light enveloped Ren's body.

The dazzling light made me close my eyes for a moment. By the time I opened them again, the blue light had already vanished.

Holding my hand, Ren looked at her dragon mark whose color had dissipated.

"...It's over?"

"I think so."

Hearing me reply affirmatively, Ren smiled in relief.

"Then Onii-chan has become... even more of an Onii-chan."

Ren happily pulled my hand and came closer.

Did her shyness decrease because my "Onii-chan" presence had increased? Ren rubbed her face against my hand like a cat.

"I see."

I smiled wryly and stroked Ren's head.

Seeing her close her eyes partially in pleasure, I decided in my heart that I was going to tell what I had just said to Ariella and Tia, the ones remaining.

Zuuuuuuuun...

But just at that moment, the cavern shook slightly with a low rumbling.

"Not... an earthquake. It's coming from above?"

Leaning against me, Ren looked up in surprise. Due to the shaking, rock fragments were breaking off and falling from the roof.

"Something might have happened on the ground. Anyway, let's get back to the group."

"Mm."

Tensing her expression, Ren nodded.

It was definitely unusual for vibrations to reach this deep underground.

Praying for Charlotte's safety, I looked upwards.

Part 5

"—Main Cannon Babel Replica, right on target. Midgardsormr's final defensive line—barriers number thirty-six to forty—Confirmed."

"Hmm... This firepower is pretty mediocre. It's a bit lacking considering it's a legacy from a lost civilization, Atlantis. It's quite doubtful whether it will reach the level of dragons even after completion."

Listening to his subordinate's report, Loki Jotunheim whispered in disinterest.

He was on the bridge of the battleship Naglfar. Staring intently at the small island on the other side of the broken barriers, Loki ordered.

"This fleet will remain on standby here. Transport a landing party using small boats. Hold the paratroopers for now. The island's automated air defense system could still be operational."

"Affirmative."

Listening to his subordinates pass on his orders to various locations, Loki quietly increased his killing intent.

This was to allow his blade to reach the head of the accursed "Gray"—

"They... have finally made a move."

Charlotte B. Lord was standing in the balcony of her private bedroom on the clock tower's top floor, murmuring with displeasure.

The damaged portions of Midgardsormr were too extensive and could no longer stop the fleet from invading.

"We clearly replied, saying we accept the inspection. Yet they still act with such brutality..."

"Our ploy to stall for time was too overt. The excuse that Midgardsormr is out of control and the barriers could not be lowered... It was a bit too contrived."

Standing a step behind Charlotte, Maika Stuart remarked in resignation.

"It couldn't be helped. There was no other way to delay the inspection. But... with this, we now know their stance."

With her hand on the balcony railing, Charlotte glared at the fleet sharply.

"This incident is fundamentally a war between Midgard and NIFL, conducted under the pretext of inspection. Their target is most likely me. However, students might get caught in the crossfire."

Saying that, Charlotte brought her thumb into her mouth and bit into it with her sharp canines.

Red droplets of blood flowed out from the wound, falling on the ground.

"Charlotte-sama, are you by any chance going to—"

Witnessing this scene. Maika's expression stiffened.

"Take out the blade, Maika."

"...Yes."

Ordered by Charlotte, Maika took out a knife hidden in her sleeve. Drawn from its sheath, the knife was deeply engraved with grooves resembling a leaf's veins.

"I entrust my blood to you. Become the Blood Lord's fang and carve my testament into their bodies."

"—Affirmative."

Kneeling on the floor, Maika offered up the knife reverently. Charlotte placed her hand on the knife, allowing the droplets of blood flowing from her finger to drip onto the blade.

Falling on the blade, the blood droplets entered the grooves, producing a red pattern on the knife. Once Charlotte withdrew her hand, Maika immediately returned the knife to its sheath.

"Hand all remaining 'Blood Bullets' to Haruka."

"You wish to have her attack people?"

Maika stood up, her face subtly clouding up.

"She is also a vassal who has exchanged a pact with me. It'd be a problem if she didn't pull her weight. Besides, they won't die unless they're shot in the head."

Charlotte declared coldly and licked the wound on her thumb. Immediately, the bleeding stopped and the wound itself disappeared completely.

"Understood. I shall inform her."

"Oh, make it quick. It'll be too late once students are captured as hostages. Initiative will fall into their hands."

"Very well."

Maika nodded and was about to leave the room when she paused with the door handle in her hand. Without turning around to face Charlotte, she asked:

"Are you really—certain? Using your authority in this manner... Living in the same manner as Leonardo-sama... This was not what you wished for."

Questioned, Charlotte continued to stare outside. With her back to Maika, she replied quietly.

"—I am certain. Before long, I will use this authority *to dominate the world*. I have already resolved myself to be human no longer."

"...Charl! This obligation, you..."

"Maika."

Charlotte's sharp voice stopped Maika who was turning around with a vehement voice.

"...Thank you."

Hearing Charlotte say these two words in a tiny voice, Maika clenched her fist instantly. Without continuing her sentence, she quickly departed.

Chapter 4 - Reversed Athena

Part 1

While others were feeling a strong quake, Ariella Lu was alone in the room, looking at the screen of her portable terminal.

The rest of the girls were gathered in the living room. From behind the door, she could hear their panicking voices.

However, Ariella did not move. Looking at the terminal's screen, she sighed slightly.

With no reception here, the terminal could not perform its duties as a communications device. She could only use it to read data that had been stored beforehand.

In front of Ariella's eyes was a call history of repeated incoming calls starting from a week ago. Since the caller's identity was masked, the number was unknown and all that was recorded were the times of the calls.

Like the earlier quake, these calls were warning signs of the imminent end to everything.

Presently, the end moment was arriving.

She knew this. She already knew this.

"I was so happy."

Ariella murmured softly in apparent resignation.

To her, everyday life was something that must come to an end.

What she had lost in the beginning was an everyday life surrounded by warm family despite a lack of material wealth.

Losing their lives in a civil war, her family's souls had been gluttonously devoured by Hraesvelgr.

Without anywhere to go, Ariella had been taken in by the church she used to go to. However, instead of attending mass, she would always stare off into the sky from the bell tower.

Knowing that her parents had not been "summoned to heaven," she found prayer to be meaningless.

—What should I do for everyone?

Staring at the sky where Hraesvelgr had flown away, Ariella had asked herself countless times.

What occupied her heart was anger towards the unreasonable and hatred for Hraesvelgr.

However, it was impossible to seek revenge against a dragon unless war ended.

Even so, Ariella's ill-defined enmity did not disappear. Soon, she joined an organization of dragon-haters.

What should she do? ...She did not know, but she definitely wanted companions.

People who shared the same feelings as her.

That wish for companions was soon fulfilled.

However, the organization did not have the power to fight dragons. All it did was come into conflict with dragon-worshiping cults and oppose mafias that secretly exploited Ds. They also spread word about the dangers of the Ds who were campaigning for the restoration of their human rights—In other words, what the organization fought were humans.

But inside an organization whose solidarity was rock solid, founded upon similar pasts and ideology between members, Ariella did not feel lonely there.

There were many boys and girls her age or younger. Ariella felt she had found her new family there. Furthermore, it was during training when Ariella became aware of her previously undiscovered talents.

—I'm suited to fighting. Too suited.

Realizing this aspect of hers, she trained and controlled it. She now had a role to play within the organization.

It felt unimaginably fulfilling to have something that needed to be done and was within one's own power. She was also glad that playing an active role would lead the younger children to treat her as a hero.

But these days suddenly came to an end.

The power to generate dark matter, regarded with enmity by the organization, had awakened in Ariella herself.

A cursed destiny. She hated her own body and power.

Children, formerly close to her, would throw rocks at her. She understood that her everyday life at the organization was ruined.

When the organization began to discuss her execution, she accepted everything in resignation.

But in the end, the cash-strapped organization sold Ariella off through underground channels. Money had won out over emotions and righteous cause.

She had been sold to a research lab in Japan. Told that it was a man who engaged in illegal research with Ds, Ariella prepared herself to be dissected to pieces.

But contrary to what Ariella expected, this researcher—Miyazawa Kenya—treated Ariella courteously. Beyond examining her, he only asked her to take care of his daughter Ren.

"Ren was like an unfriendly cat back then..."

Thinking back to those times, Ariella immersed herself in nostalgia.

She did not respond no matter how Ariella tried to strike up conversation, putting Ariella at an impasse. But then she spontaneously started calling Ariella "Onee-chan" and admiring her.

The days from then on had been very happy, never want for lack of money for the first time in her life.

However, this life did not last long. Due to Ren becoming a D too, the distorted family life ended.

No—It was Ariella herself who had ended it herself.

To prevent Ren from becoming the subject of experiments, she sought the police for protection and blew the whistle on Miyazawa Kenya.

Then the next part of her everyday life had lasted until now.

Days spent with fellow Ds at Midgard.

"I was so happy..."

Saying the same words again as the beginning, Ariella stood up.

Noticing the earlier shaking, Ren and him were going to return.

There should have been enough time for talking—Ren would have conveyed her feelings to him sufficiently.

This was the only things she was honestly worried about.

To spend her remaining time with her "younger sister," Ariella slowly walked to the living room.

Part 2

"...Neither Shinomiya-sensei nor Maika-san have come."

Sitting in the living room sofa, Lisa murmured with worry at the ceiling.

"With no reception on the terminals, there's no way to confirm the situation outside..."

I stood with my back against the wall, looking at my terminal that could not communicate. Deep underground of Midgard, calls could not made here. Without cable facilities linked to the surface, we were completely isolated on the information front.

"N-NIFL is invading?"

Iris walked back and forth between everyone in worry.

A few hours had passed since the intense shaking. After dinner, all of us had gathered in the living room.

"—Perhaps. If that is true, then they won't have the leisure to visit us."

Drinking black tea at the table, Firill agreed with Iris.

"We knew that an inspection was coming sooner or later. There's no need to panic."

Idly braiding Vritra's hair to play with, Kili spoke as though the situation did not involve her.

"Conflict within the same species, how meaningless..."

Vritra shrugged philosophically despite the fact that her hair was being played with.

"Truly meaningless..."

Tia, who had been in low spirits the whole time, nodded from her seat next to Lisa.

"Should we go confirm the situation?"

Clutching my clothing tightly, Ren suggested to our group.

"—No, I believe it is not time for reckless action. We should watch a little longer."

Sitting on a cushion, Mitsuki offered her opinion, but compared to what she said, I felt more concerned by her slightly lethargic look.

"Mitsuki, are you okay?"

"Oh, yes. I just feel a bit... hot. I must have spent too much time in the bath."

Blushing slightly, Mitsuki replied to me.

This had started ever since she returned from the hot spring yesterday. Although it seemed like she was feeling faint from the bath, I was still a bit worried whether or not this was an effect brought by the transformation.

"If you feel any worse, be honest and tell us, okay? Mitsuki, you're always pushing yourself too hard."

"—Nowhere as bad as you, Nii-san. However... I understand."

Pouting slightly, Mitsuki nodded. Then Shion separated from Jeanne uncharacteristically and stared at Mitsuki's face.

"aRe YoU reALly oKaY?"

"Oh... I am fine. Thank you for worrying."

Mitsuki was slightly surprised but happily touched Shion's cheek. It was possible that she saw a shadow of Shinomiya Miyako in Shion's voice and facial expressions.

"...thAnK goodness."

Shion smiled slightly, apparently knowing what Mitsuki had felt. Then Shion returned to Jeanne's side and sat on her lap.

Jeanne watched Shion tenderly and returned to the conversation that had gone on a bit of a tangent.

"—I also believe it is too early for action. We should stay vigilant for now. There are two paths into this cavern... It would be best to take turns keeping watch throughout the night."

Hearing Jeanne give a practical opinion like a soldier, I nodded too.

"That's right. But the ones on watch should be limited to those who are able to engage humans in combat. Jeanne and I—also Kili, can I ask you to help?"

"Eh— What a pain. And it's like a steam cooker outside..."

Retorting, Kili frowned overtly.

"Don't be like that. Please."

However, I bowed my head to her and did not give up, causing her to sigh deeply and slump her shoulders.

"—Got it, okay. But you'll have to reward me later."

Kili looked at me seductively and accepted the job of keeping watch. However, Lisa blushed and looked at Kili.

"R-Reward—What kind of reward do you intend to exact from him!?"

"That would be a secret. If you're jealous, why don't you try asking him for a reward too? We are all his mates... I will turn a blind eye if it's just something on that level."

In response to Kili's joke, Lisa yelled with her face red.

"Please get off your high horse! I am simply stopping you from doing inappropriate things!"

"Sure sure. Do your best."

Having made a move without Lisa's knowledge the night before, Kili answered in a laid back manner.

"Hmm... I shall have you regret underestimating me."

Kili and Lisa glared at each other.

At this moment, Ariella spoke up for the first time.

"If we're alternating shifts, you need one more person. I'll do it."

Rising from her chair, Ariella stood between Lisa and Kili as though to stop them from staring at each other. Apparently recalling what had happened last night, Kili looked displeased.

"Taking on troublesome tasks on your own initiative, how meddlesome you are. Oh well—You're even more capable than Jeanne-chan. I don't mind."

Despite sarcastic words, Kili accepted Ariella as a candidate. Jeanne pretended not to care.

"No wait, Ariella's dragon mark is colored. If she gets captured by NIFL in that state..."

However, I was quite hesitant to endanger Ariella in her current state.

"Don't worry, Mononobe-kun. It's not like we're going above ground. We're just watching near the entrances. There's not much difference in risk."

Ariella evaded my worries and replied in a relaxed voice.

"...I got it. But don't overdo it, okay?"

Since she had a good point, I reluctantly nodded. Despite the subtle unease in my heart, it was also true that I had no one else I could ask. Judging from Ariella's combat abilities that I had witnessed a number of times, she would be capable of delaying NIFL's soldiers.

"Onii-chan..."

Ren tugged my sleeve, looking like she had something to say. She probably wanted me to hurry and have my discussion with Ariella.

I nodded at Ren, gently stroking her head to reassure her.

"Mm..."

Making an expression that read "very well," Ren closed her eyes partially.

According to the sequence decided through rock-paper-scissors, Ariella was next with Tia last.

From what I heard from Mitsuki, the two of them had intentionally chosen the last spots.

Even if they had doubts or worries, I had already decided what I must do.

—The power to protect them all... and the *reason* to do so, that was what I wanted.

Confirming my own wish that I had confirmed thanks to Ren, I firmed my determination to confront the last two girls.

Part 3

That night, I guarded one of the cavern's entrances to protect everyone who was sleeping.

"...This place is a bit too hot."

Watching the metal door that was installed on a wall of rock, I wiped sweat off my brow. To be honest, this really was not an environment one could stay very long while clothed.

Although I endured it for a while, after deciding my energy would become depleted at this rate, I opened the door and moved over to the stairs leading to the lower levels of Midgard.

From this location, I would know immediately no matter who came down the stairs. With the door closed, sealing off the heat and humidity, it was more comfortable than expected.

Ariella was guarding the other entrance. I should have some time to talk to her when Kili and Jeanne took over the next shift, but—Just as I as thinking over these matters, sitting on the stairs, I heard faint knocking at the door.

"...Yuu, are you there?"

Then I heard Tia's slightly apprehensive voice. I stood up in surprise and opened the heavy door.

"—Thank goodness. Tia thought you had gone off somewhere."

Standing at the door was Tia, stroking her chest, apparently reassured. But when I saw Vritra standing behind her, I was a bit taken aback.

"What's going on, Tia? And with Vritra too..."

I looked at Vritra, who went "hmph" and turned her face to the side. Though I had no idea why, she looked quite displeased. Had Tia brought her here by coercion?

"Tia has something important to tell Yuu. Is this a good time?"

"Sure—I don't think it matters if we talk while guarding this place."

I nodded, thinking she wanted to discuss the risks related to transformation.

"Thanks!"

Tia smiled slightly and came over to this side of the door with Vritra.

I sat on the stairs and waved to her. Keeping one person's distance, Tia sat down lightly. Vritra watched us with her back leaning against the closed door.

"To be frank—I've been wanted to talk to you the whole time, Tia."

I looked at Tia and spoke.

"...Why?"

"I heard from Iris that you've been down lately. And in fact, you really are acting differently from usual. I'm very worried."

Intending to use this opportunity to find out clearly what Tia's troubles were, I replied to her in a gentle tone of voice.

What on earth was troubling her...? I had thought a lot about it and come up with a guess.

"Could it be that... you're worried about your horns, Tia?"

Looking at the two red horns on her head, I asked cautiously.

This was what I had guessed she was worrying about. If touching me would result in a transformation that could make her lose the horns she had not been born with—She might lose the power to control Yggdrasil.

Iris and Shion's transformations were enough to deduce this. Hence, Tia would probably feel more of a dilemma than the others—

"...No. The horns are fine."

But contrary to my expectations, Tia shook her head.

"Really?"

Completely surprised, I doubted.

"Yes... The body's transformation is due to dark matter... As I am now, I can interfere in the process and keep the horns."

Tia was speaking in a more mature tone of voice than usual, but I was extremely surprised by what she said.

"What... Tia, you can control dragonification?"

"I still couldn't earlier. During the Zwei—Shion—incident, it was beyond me... But now that I have synchronized completely with Yggdrasil, it's possible to hack Vritra's dragonification mechanism."

Saying that, Tia glanced in Vritra's direction.

"...As much as it displeaseth me, 'tis the truth what she said. The Akashic Record's computational abilities ought to be sufficient to interfere in biogenic transmutation. Be that as it may, the system, which drives the transformation upon contact between synchronized dragon marks, is written in a D's genes and impossible to stop completely. A poorly done job would result in an amorphous form and a breakdown of self-identity."

Sulking, Vritra confirmed Tia's claim and warned.

"A breakdown of self-identity—Tia, don't force yourself if it's that dangerous!"

I said to Tia in a panic but she shook her head lightly.

"Interfering in another D's dragonification is very difficult indeed, but there is no problem when it's myself. Tia knows herself best, so don't worry."

Smiling tenderly, Tia explained to me.

"But..."

"Compared to that, Tia fears something even more... It came to Tia's knowledge after synchronizing with Yggdrasil. About dragons, what is to come, everything is..."

Tia looked at me with pleading eyes, her voice trembling.

"You've found the information in Yggdrasil...? So in other words, Vritra's original goal has been achieved?"

I confirmed with Vritra who was standing arms akimbo.

Vritra had made a human stand-in to appear before us so that she could enter a dialogue with Tia who had taken control of Yggdrasil's core. However, Tia had not been able to keep up with Vritra's conversation because she had insufficient information due to minimizing her link with Yggdrasil.

After that, for the sake of obtaining data from the Akashic Record, Tia had increased her synchronization rate with Yggdrasil. However, the arrival of Kraken Zwei had changed Vritra's mind, causing her to choose to fight us.

"I have had talks with Tia Lightning Yggdrasil on several occasions. Our conclusion is that we must first confirm whether thou art truly Neun."

Nodding at my question, Vritra looked back at me as though she was targeting something.

"Neun... Both you and Kili have mentioned it many times. What the heck is it and what does it mean?"

Vritra had called me irregular as a male D whereas Kili suggested I was Neun.

"Indeed... Shall I explain?"

Vritra nodded at Tia to confirm.

"Wait. Tia will explain. But before that, Yuu..."

"What is it?"

Tia looked at me seriously so I urged her to speak. Blushing, she continued.

"Tia... wants to hold hands with Yuu. Otherwise, it feels uneasy."

"Uh..."

The intense emotions conveyed in her whispers were making my heart race.

I knew what Tia meant without explicit explanation. She had decided to make physical contact with me.

In that case, I must convey to her my thoughts from my conversation with Ren.

"Yes—No problem. I'd hate not being able to do that for you, Tia. If you have troubles, I want to aid you. I want to protect you. So... Let's hold hands."

Saying that, I extended my hand towards Tia.

"Yuu... Thank you."

Tia looked reassured and slowly reached out to me. Sparks of lightning flashed in her horns' surroundings.

Interfering in dragonification was most likely quite a delicate task.

To avoid disrupting her concentration, I waited for her to touch me on her own.

"—Here goes."

Murmuring to herself, Tia held my hand tightly.

My dragon mark glowed blue. Light also erupted from the dragon mark on Tia's thigh.

But before that light could envelop Tia's entire body, The electrical sparks flashed especially intensely.

Failing to reach Tia's horns, the blue light dissipated as faint particles in the surroundings.

"It is... finished."

After the light vanished completely, Tia panted heavily.

As far as I could see, there was no change in her appearance, not even her horns.

"You worked hard, Tia."

What kind of challenge she had surmounted—I could not imagine at all. In any case, I congratulated her first on her effort.

"Yes... Then Yuu is now Tia's husband!"

Tia happily jumped at my chest.

"H-Hey—!"

Instead of holding hands, Tia was hugging me with all her strength, startling me.

"I can finally touch you, Yuu. Now... I don't have to be afraid anymore."

But after I noticed the mild trembling in Tia's body, I understood what kind of fear she had been enduring.

"—I'm by your side. So don't worry."

To reassure Tia, I patted her back.

"Yes... Then I'll begin, Yuu. About Neun... About dragons..."

"Please."

What kind of truth was she going to reveal? No matter what happened, I must not allow Tia to worry. I nodded firmly.

Tia backed away slightly, looked into my eyes then spoke, controlling her voice.

"Well, Neun... refers to the ninth counterdragon."

"Counterdragon?"

Hearing that term for the first time, I frowned.

"Yes... The dragons we have fought so far—Basilisk, Hraesvelgr, Yggdrasil and Vritra—are all counterdragons... Rather than true dragons."

"What... H-Hold on. What do you mean by a true dragon? So Basilisk and Hraesvelgr were fake dragons?"

With the complete overturn of publicly recognized fact, I was plunged into confusion.

"Well... They are not fake. Dragons are dragons... However, they were dragons born from this world—born from Gaia. Oh, but Eins, the world itself, probably doesn't count as a dragon..."

Tia explained in a bit of a dilemma but she was getting harder and harder to understanding. Her explanations were peppered with unknown terms and my questions kept increasing.

Seeing me like that, Vritra shrugged in exasperation.

"...Explaining everything to thee would be too much trouble. 'Tis a pointless waste of time at this rate. I shall offer a concise explanation."

Leaving the door she was leaning against, Vritra approached us.

"A true dragon is a calamity that threateneth the continued existence of the world as a whole. 'Tis not limited to lifeforms, but includes phenomena too."

Looking straight into my confused eyes, Vritra spoke.

"A calamity..."

I repeated the word once. Vritra nodded solemnly.

"Indeed—Gaia has experienced eight major crises to this date. Great calamities that could thoroughly wipe out all existing ecosystems and environments. We counterdragons were born to avoid such destruction."

Vritra paused here and showed a mocking expression.

"You dragons are the world's allies? Despite spreading those great disasters... dragon disasters throughout the world..."

Seeing Vritra speak though her existence were legitimate, I retorted in momentary impulse. Iris' parents had clearly died because of a dragon disaster. I could bring myself to simply nod and accept things with a "So I see!"

But contrary to what I expected, Vritra shook her head.

"Contemporary counterdragons have lost enemies to fight. Once born, an authority will not disappear, inherited by others when the holder perisheth. Hence, the antibodies are harming the world on this occasion. 'Tis possible to call dragon disasters an allergic reaction of the world. Be that as it may, know that ye humans are not victims."

"What?"

What was going on? I frowned.

"The second and eighth calamities were closely linked to mankind. Well, 'tis knowledge I obtained from the core of 'Verdant' Kiskanu—the previous Yggdrasil. Compared to I, Sieben, thou ought to know more clearly as Zwo's successor."

At this moment, Vritra looked at Tia.

Zwo, Kiskanu—These were some of the names Yggdrasil had mentioned when contacting me.

Yggdrasil was a biological computer consisting of all plant life in the world. Eradicating its existence completely was virtually impossible. As a result, Tia was currently acting as a substitute for its core consciousness.

In other words, Kiskanu was a being that had ruled over the plant network even earlier than Yggdrasil.

Thinking over these mattes, I looked at Tia again and she nodded.

"Yes... 'Verdant' Kiskanu was a counterdragon born for the sake of opposing the second calamity. Hence, full records remain in the Akashic Record. The Second Dragon—'Ultimate Wisdom' Atlantis... was the first alien species to arrive on Gaia. They possessed an extremely advanced civilization and were the ancestors of mankind."

"What—The ancestors of mankind... were dragons? Wait, but... if the world wasn't destroyed back then, the counterdragon should've driven mankind away, right?"

I asked while feeling shocked. Apparently anticipating such a question from me, Tia continued calmly.

"What was regarded as a calamity, a dragon, was not mankind but humanity's civilization and technology. Hence, Kiskanu was bestowed the power to control electricity—the authority to manipulate information. Only Atlantis' technology was uprooted and eliminated."

"Destroying technology..."

"What do you think happened to humans after losing technology?"

"To survive, they'd have no choice but to live primitively, starting with hunting—Oh, so humans came up with civilization again after that?"

Since they were called the ancestors of mankind, that was only inevitable.

"Indeed. But after countless years—humanity has acquired civilization sufficient to destroy the world again. Hence, to prevent humans from causing the eighth calamity themselves, a new counterdragon was born..."

I already knew who Tia was referring to.

Possessing the ability to dominate mankind and avoid nuclear war, Charlotte's father—the first "Gray" Vampire.

Reading from my face that I already knew, Vritra grinned in mockery.

"Ye humans are fortunate. Neither your civilization nor your race were wiped out. In that case, 'tis evidence that mankind and human civilization had been recognized as a part of the world. However, this judgment was made quite urgently..."

Vritra spoke suggestively. Realizing the internal connections, I changed the subject. Having heard the explanations so far, I already understood the meaning behind the existence of Neun.

"Then after taking care of mankind, Neun is the only one left to resist the ninth calamity?"

"Indeed. However, I believe 'tis highly unlikely that thou art Neun."

Nodding, Vritra looked at me coldly.

"Tia believes Yuu is Neun! Yggdrasil thought so too and wanted to obtain Yuu in order to survive the ninth calamity."

However, Tia clenched her fist in front of her chest and insisted. In contrast, Vritra shrugged mildly.

"Hmph... One cannot rely on the opinion of Yggdrasil that had focused its full effort on self-preservation. More importantly, this contradicts Kiskanu's viewpoint."

"And that is...?"

Apparently poked in a sore spot, Tia stopped but I was still lost.

Vritra had said just now that she had obtained her knowledge from Kiskanu. However, she and the next core consciousness, Yggdrasil, had become enemies with different viewpoints. What had happened in the course of all this?

"What's going on? Explain properly. I don't think I'm Neun either... What evidence do you have, Vritra?"

Without hiding my doubts, I asked and Vritra nodded deeply.

"Yes. The reason is simple. Apart from the eighth calamity, which was a retread of Atlantis, every calamity would increase in threat level... By the seventh time, it was already beyond the counterdragons' ability to defend."

"Beyond the counterdragons' ability to defend...? In other words, the world ended once already?"

I pointed out the contradiction in Vritra's words. However, Vritra looked at me solemnly and confirmed what I had pointed out.

"Indeed, *the world has been destroyed once already*."

"Huh...?"

What was she talking about? I stared at Vritra speechlessly.

"I shall tell thee how the world survived the seventh calamity. The answer—It did not. Unable to resist that calamity, Kiskanu, who had joined forces with me, was destroyed together with all plant life. After the calamity had left, I used dark matter to restore the world as much as possible."

If plant life went extinct, it was inevitable for Kiskanu's consciousness to disappear as the core. That was surely the point when Yggdrasil took over. But—

"Restoring the world... Is that even possible?"

Unable to accept such a shocking idea, I asked Vritra.

"'Twas achieved by consuming mine existence, dark matter itself. Nay... Strictly speaking, 'twas my predecessor. As I am now, I am more akin to lingering remains. I neither have the ability to create life again nor enough dark matter to fully restore the world. Ye Ds may not know it, but dark matter is *limited*."

Answering with self-deprecation, Vritra gazed at me.

"Yet that despairing seventh calamity was only a prelude. Eventually, the 'main body' shall arrive at Gaia as predicted by Kiskanu's analysis. The world shall be destroyed in the ninth calamity."

"..."

Indeed, this conclusion was only natural. If the ninth calamity was stronger than the seventh, destruction was unavoidable. By the time of the seventh, the world had already given up on stopping the calamities.

If the world could only be restored once, there were no countermeasures left after using this move.

"But displeased that the world I risked my life to save would be destroyed again, I intended to strengthen life on Gaia to improve odds of survival. This was the plan to use Ds to multiply the number of counterdragons. However, this attempt was foiled by you lot—nay, Yggdrasil."

Confronted with Vritra's angry stares, Tia spoke with a slightly troubled expression.

"After Kiskanu perished, Yggdrasil—the newly born core consciousness of the Akashic Record—hated dying again, thus prioritizing its survival above all else. As a result, it tried to gather authorities as much as possible, so that it may survive..."

"Survive... So making a deal with me and seizing my consciousness was all for that?"

Recalling how Yggdrasil had stolen control of my mind, I asked.

Back then, Yggdrasil had tried everything to control me. Without Charlotte's help, my consciousness would have been seized completely.

"Yes. If you really are Neun, Yuu, then you'd have antibodies to resist the ninth calamity. Yggdrasil believed that acquiring them would be the best way to increase chances of survival."

Listening to this point, Vritra frowned with displeasure.

"Hmph—since there are no means of resistance, 'tis impossible to give rise to new counterdragons either. We should not place our hopes in Neun's existence... Moreover..."

Halfway through, Vritra stared intently at me.

"What?"

Curious, I asked her. Subtle fear appeared on Vritra's face, almost as though she was considering an unthinkable possibility.

"If thou art Neun—'Tis *very odd thou hast not had an encounter*."

"An encounter? An encounter with what—?"

I sought her explanation. Vritra sighed and continued.

"The ninth calamity, the Ninth Dragon."

"What...?"

I held my breath and focused, looking into Vritra's eyes with an "are you serious?" gaze. However, Vritra's eyes glinted with solemnity and she answered.

"The Counter Code appeareth upon the entity's first encounter with the calamity. Unrelated to race or disposition, 'tis by chance that the entity transformeth into a counterdragon. Hence, if thou art Neun, thou must have encountered the calamity face to face a long time ago."

Vritra supplemented her earlier explanation. My confusion grew ever stronger.

"Calamity... But I don't have any memory of meeting that?"

The first dragon I encountered was "Blue" Hekatonkheir—but it was actually Vritra's fictional armament. Vritra herself was a counterdragon too.

"'Tis as suspected. Without self-awareness as a counterdragon, 'tis impossible for thee to be Neun. Even without being told by anyone else, the initial entity conferred with the authority ought to knew what it needeth to do."

Speaking of which, I remember hearing that Charlotte's father, the previous gray dragon, had received power to "save the world." In other words, he knew how to use his authority from the start.

However, I thought over it again and again but could not find this sort of self-awareness.

"Nevertheless, 'tis no matter, I shall try asking thee this. *When didst thou first realize thou art not human*?"

Due to my facial expression, Vritra felt very confident in her beliefs and asked calmly.

However, my heart began to beat rapidly the instant I heard her question.

"—"

"Yuu...?"

Tia looked at me in worry but my vision was overwritten with a scene from the past.

It was a past memory I had been dreaming of recently. To me personally, it was the greatest calamity.

The traffic accident that Mitsuki, her parents and I, the four of us had gotten involved in.

That was the time when Mitsuki and I had awakened the ability to generate dark matter to save our lives. However, Uncle and Auntie...

The painful sense of despair back then was carved in the depths of my heart.

What had I seen over there? No, I did not see anything. Everything was sealed away in *darkness*. Terrifying no matter where. Even my own existence felt ambiguous—

Knock knock!

As a terrible chill climbed along my spine and I realized something, I was pulled back to reality by the sound of fierce knocking on the door.

"—Onii-chan!"

I turned to the door. It was Ren's voice. Startled by a voice that was hard to imagine coming from her usually reticent self, I hurried over to the doorway.

"What happened!?"

I hastily opened the door and Ren hugged me suddenly.

"Onii-chan... Onee-chan, Onee-chan is...!"

Looking up at me, Ren screamed desperately with tears streaming down her face. There was only one person whom she called "Onee-chan."

"Ariella... What happened to her?"

I placed my hand on Ren's shoulder and asked, suppressing my voice. If I were to show anxiety, Ren would probably get even more emotional.

"Mm... She is not here."

Nodding, Ren replied.

"Not here?"

"Onee-chan is nowhere!"

Ren's shout, echoing in the cavern, was dominated by anxiety and the fear of loss.

Part 4

"..."

I ran as fast as I could inside the cavern where the water vapor made for poor visibility.

My destination was the passage on the other end that Ariella was in charge of guarding.

Ren had gone over there to speak with her alone and checked the other side already, but there were no signs of her.

Tia, Vritra and the panicking Ren had gone back to the cottage together. I asked them to pass a message to Jeanne to take over my post, so our defenses should not weaken as a result.

What I had heard from Tia and Vritra, the matter of the ninth calamity, was still bouncing around in my head but I had to think about it later.

—Where on earth did Ariella go?

To avoid running past her inadvertently, I looked around and checked back and forth.

Although visibility was poor due to the water vapor, with only one path, missing her was unlikely.

Since Ren was safe, NIFL's intrusion was not possible so Ariella must have left her spot on her own volition.

Perhaps I should have talked to Ariella earlier.

Regrets and a foreboding sense that it was too late now were occupying my heart.

However, I stopped in surprise just as the door to the passage came into view.

Amidst the foggy water vapor, a figure appeared. I cautiously approached. It was a girl with her hair tied in a ponytail with a green ribbon—Ariella.

Noticing me as well, she looked in my direction.

I instantly felt a sense of relief, but immediately realized it was too soon to lower my guard.

Ren could not have lied. To be that shaken, she must have called Ariella's name many times. Had Ariella been in the cavern, she could not possibly miss Ren's voice.

"What's wrong, Mononobe-kun? Aren't you in charge of guarding the other door?"

I stopped at a distance of three meters. Ariella tilted her head and asked.

Ariella looked like she did not know that Ren had visited. In other words, she had been somewhere beyond earshot of Ren's voice when Ren had come over.

"What about you, Ariella, where did you go?"

I stared into Ariella's eyes and asked in return. However, she frowned with a lost expression.

"Where did I go? I've been here the whole time."

"—You're lying. Ren came over just and she didn't see you."

It was heartrending to expose a friend's lie, but I told her firmly.

Hearing that, Ariella widened her eyes slightly and made a wry smile.

"Really...? So Ren hasn't slept yet."

Seeing that she did not try to find an excuse, I felt bitterness fill up my heart.

"You went up?"

Considering Ren's and my movement times, she only had enough time to return from above—Midgard's lowest level. Thinking that, I confirmed with Ariella.

"Yes, I had something to do."

"Something to do huh—"

I could only think of one reason why she would go up to Midgard's lowest level and return immediately. It was what we had discussed before.

"To go somewhere with reception, were you contacting someone?"

"....."

Ariella smiled wryly but did not answer.

Although I had her pegged as an upfront person, right now, that smiling face was fake. I clenched my fist. My left hand's dragon mark was hot and painful.

"I actually don't know what you're thinking or doing, Ariella. But... if you have any troubles, I want to help you. If you're in pain, I want to support you. So, right now, could you hold my hand first?"

Saying that, I extended my left hand.

"So... you want me to become your mate, Mononobe-kun?"

"That's right. Let's talk about the rest later. I will do everything I can for your happiness, Ariella. Trust me."

I looked straight at Ariella while I spoke, prompting a flush of red on her face.

"It's almost like... a proposal."

Ariella scratched her cheek shyly and avoided eye contact. However, her wry smile did not disappear. Instead, sadness was mixed into it.

"I trust you, but as soon as I think about what I have to do next, I can't hold your hand. No... I never had the right to stay with everyone in the first place."

Staring at my outstretched hand, Ariella shook her head.

"Right...?"

"I have no right. You don't know anything about me, Mononobe-kun. If you did, you'd surely hate me."

"—Nothing of that sort. I will prove it. So tell me."

While putting down my hand, I stared at her and asserted.

"Is... that so? It's already the end, so I guess I should say it first."

However, she seemed to be refusing something. Getting a bad feeling from her use of "the end," but to avoid getting in her way, I did not ask about it.

"I think I mentioned staying in a dragon-hating organization before, right?"

"—That's right."

I confirmed.

After "Yellow" Hraesvelgr devoured the souls of her deceased family, Ariella had joined an organization hostile to Ds and dragons to seek refuge. However, when she became a D herself, the organization had sold her to Ren's father—Miyazawa Kenya—for conducting research on Ds.

"Probably because its activities were very similar to NIFL's, the organization had many ties to NIFL as well. As a result, the organization

kept in contact with NIFL and it came as no surprise when NIFL absorbed it to serve as a regional branch."

Ariella calmly talked about her organization, but when she mentioned NIFL, I felt an even more repulsive sense of foreboding.

"Apparently my organization worked under NIFL and a former cadre heard about what had happened to me and contacted me while I was being transported to Midgard. I was really surprised at the time. So frightened that I dared not breathe."

Ariella smiled wryly while making light of her experiences. But realizing everything she said was the truth, I focused with bated breath.

"Do you understand now, Mononobe-kun? Starting then, I've stayed in contact with NIFL the whole time. I gave out Midgard's inside information many times—In other words, I'm what you'd call a spy."

Ariella spoke in self-deprecation but I could not accept it so easily.

"That's very... weird. Why would you cooperate with a cadre from the organization that sold you?"

I brought up a question bu Ariella's expression turned icy cold.

"—There are reasons, many of them. Then there are also reasons too... why I must kill the principal—'Gray.'"

"What..."

Shocked, I involuntarily took a step forward, but Ariella moved her right arm to stop me.

"Aegis."

What manifested to cover her arm was a fictional armament in the shape of a gauntlet. Ariella pointed it at me and asked calmly:

"Mononobe-kun, the fact that my fictional armament takes the form of defensive gear... Do you know why?"

Although I wanted to question her on why she must kill Charlotte, in order to calm myself, I answered her question first.

"Isn't it to protect everyone—to protect Ren...?"

I thought that because Ariella always volunteered first to take on defensive missions. However, she shook her head as though saying "you regard me too highly."

"The reason is simpler than that. I don't hold weapons, no matter what their form. If I held a weapon—I'd start viewing human lives as trash."

Ariella told me mournfully then slowly unfastened the ribbon on her hair. The untied hair fell down to her shoulders.

"Ariella, what on earth are you going to..."

Unsure what meaning was behind her actions, I asked.

However, she did not answer. After gazing at the ribbon in her hand for a while, she slowly uncurled her fingers. The green ribbon floated down lightly.

Before the ribbon reached the ground, Ariella spoke.

"—Go."

Wind was released from her fictional armament, blowing the falling ribbon towards me.

After I reflexively reached out and caught the ribbon, Ariella smiled faintly.

"That ribbon was Ren's first gift to me. Although it's such an important treasure... I think it's inappropriate if I keep it while heading off to commit murder next."

"...Are you really going to kill Charl—to kill the principal?"

Holding the ribbon, I asked. She nodded without hesitation.

"Yes. Although she's immortal, I have a feeling I can kill her. Once I hold a weapon... I'll know how to kill her."

Ariella generated a black mass of dark matter in front of her, transmuting it into a silver knife.

The instant she caught it in the air, the aura exuded from her entire body changed.

An intense chill rushed up from my feet, causing cold sweat to break out of my forehead.

Warned by instinct, I took a leap back to pull away. Unlike the times when I confronted Hreidmar, this felt almost as though death itself had taken physical form before me.

Holding the knife in her hand, Ariella sneered at my response.

"The first time I took part in the organization's training, I noticed my talent... So dangerous that I almost killed the instructor... Afraid of that side of mine... I only learned combat skills that did not require weapons."

Her voice and expression were sharp beyond compare. Although I had maintained sufficient distance, I still felt as though I had a knife to my throat.

However, why? I did not feel any sense of dissonance to see her like that. It was probably because she was too similar. Not to Hreidmar... but to me—My "Fafnir."

"Then drop the knife, take this ribbon and return with me to Ren's side."

I raised the ribbon and said to Ariella. Precisely because it was so similar, I could understand what kind of change had happened to Ariella now. Instinct warned me it was a step that must never be taken. However, she quietly shook her head.

"I actually do want to see Ren one last time... But by now, I can't go back. I'm meeting up with NIFL's forces next, to take Gray's head."

"—Don't go!"

Anti-personnel weapon—AT Nergal.

I generated dark matter and instantly transmuted it into an anti-personnel projectile-based electroshock gun. Using this Nergal, I would be able to neutralize Ariella without killing her. It was past the point of stopping her with words, but I had to convey these thoughts to her.

"I now know what you've hidden till now, Ariella. But even so, I can't hate you and I've no intention of going back on what I said in the beginning. For my sake and Ren's, as well as your own... I will stop you no matter what you're planning to do!"

I pointed the gun's muzzle at her and declared.

"Mononobe-kun, you are so nice. But... Do you really get it? During the Leviathan battle, that NIFL team that infiltrated Midgard—Can you still forgive me even if I was the one who brought them in?"

"That's right, I forgive you. But you'll have to apologize to Iris afterwards."

I instantly answered without any wavering.

My heart was not wavering the slightest. Suppose what Ariella said was true, I believe there must be reasons too. Even if she had reasons for killing Charlotte, Ariella actually did not want to commit murder.

I was convinced not because of presumption or arrogance, but because I had been watching her all along.

"Haha—Looks like I underestimated you again."

Widening her eyes at my answer, Ariella smiled and touched her lower abdomen with her hand, the location of her dragon mark.

"At the Principality of Erlia, starting from the time when I watched you fight Hraesvelgr... I couldn't help but become obsessed with you. When we returned to Japan and I saw how you did everything you could for Ren's sake, I wanted to support you. By the time I realized, I couldn't tear my gaze away from you anymore."

After gently touching her lower abdomen, Ariella readied her knife in a carefree manner.

"My dragon mark probably changed color because of these feelings. Somewhere in my heart, I hoped you'd choose me."

"In that case... You don't need to overthink things. I will hold you tightly in these arms and never let you go."

Holding Nergal, I declared but Ariella grinned.

"Sure—Mononobe-kun. I will obey you—if you can touch me and make me yours. However... Definitely, you won't be able to stop me."

With these words, Ariella kicked the ground. Instead of retreating, she was closing in.

The risk of touching me should increase by approaching me, but she still chose to fight with a knife.

"!"

I pulled Nergal's trigger in response to her charging in.

The acute gunshot echoed inside the cavern while electrical sparks flashed on the ground.

—She had dodged.

Although I could see her jumping to the side just before the bullet could strike, by the time I continued to look for her, she had already vanished.

I felt a chilling aura of death.

Relying on my senses, I shot Nergal to the side.

There was a flash of electricity in the white water vapor and a sharp metallic noise. She had most likely used the knife to defend. However, Nergal's electrical shock should conduct through a metallic blade.

Just as I shifted my gaze towards the location of the impact, there were no signs of Ariella collapsing. In other words...

—She had blocked by throwing the knife huh?

Such unbelievable skills were making me focus with bated breath. At this moment, acute killing intent approached me from behind.

"Guh!?"

What appeared before me when I turned my head back was an incoming silver blade. As though tracing a line of killing intent, the blade was blocked by me using Nergal.

But Ariella emerged from the water vapor, facing me directly. In her hand was a new knife created from dark matter.

I fired Nergal to intercept her but Ariella swung the knife. The instant before the bullet struck, she released her hand.

A flash of electricity jumped in the air. Ariella continued to close in while swinging her arm. More than ten masses of dark matter were summoned in her surroundings, turning into knives at the same time.

"Generate a storm."

While raising her right arm, equipped with her fictional armament, Ariella spoke sharply.

The blades attacked, accompanied by a storm.

Confronted with this massive threat, I summoned the will to fight and kill.

Following the wind, I jumped back, only using Nergal to strike down knives that were about to hit me.

Normally, it would be impossible to predict the knives' trajectories, but I captured them through my skin's senses. Mixed inside me, "Fafnir" was driving my body.

While I was striking down the storm of blades, Ariella closed in even more.

During an instant that felt as though time had lengthened, our eyes met and she smiled.

Within arm's reach. She had no knife in her hand. A perfect chance.

However, instinct warned me of danger.

This was no opening—

Obeying instinct, I took half a step back and pointed Nergal's muzzle at her.

But in that instant, I saw it.

The first knife I had deflected in the air had returned to Ariella's hand, spinning as though there was an attractive force.

A flash of silver—

Before I could pull the trigger, the barrel had already been sliced. Had I not stepped back, the attack would have struck me in a vital.

However, the crisis was not over. Ariella pressed on and charged.

I threw the two halves of Nergal at Ariella to buy time then picked up a knife that had fallen on the ground.

But at that moment, Ariella had already launched her next attack.

Despite my unstable footing, I twisted my body and swung the knife to counterattack approaching death.

A sharp impact rang out while Ariella and I became locked in a struggle, resisting each other's knife.

We were holding the knives in our right hands. I reached out with my empty left hand to touch Ariella, but—

"I knew it. You're very strong, Mononobe-kun."

Ariella suddenly stopped pushing and used my opposing force to jump backwards.

My left hand missed while Ariella reconstructed Aegis in the air. To guard against offensive applications of transmutation, I generated dark matter in my empty left hand.

Fictional armament—Siegfried.

What manifested was a fictional armament in the shape of a gun. I aimed the muzzle at Ariella but she was a step faster in transmutation.

"A serious fight with you at last. This is seriously awesome."

Instead of targeting me, Ariella aimed flames overhead. A giant explosion shook the entire cavern. Seeing the roof of the cavern collapse, I hastily generated antigravitational matter.

"Antigravity."

The white light expanded, temporarily pushing away the falling giant rocks. But this move was very limited in area. Due to consuming all dark matter in the fictional armament in one go, Siegfried disappeared from my hand.

Outside the white light, the collapse continued. Amidst clouds of smoke and dust, Ariella's figure vanished.

"Well then, Mononobe-kun, I'll be leaving now... Don't chase after me, okay? The next time we meet, I'm certain I'll no longer be myself. Even if you don't kill me, I'll probably kill you—"

I heard her voice through the thunderous noise of falling rocks.

"Wait, Ariella!"

I called out. I wanted to rush over to her but the repulsive field was weakening and a large number of rocks came falling, blocking my path. By this point, catching up to her was impossible.

If I used an explosion or a repulsive field to push the rubble away by force, the cavern's roof might collapse further.

—Screw this.

However, a tide of anger was seething in my heart.

"Screw this!!"

Intense emotions erupted through my mouth.

Even if I could not touch her with these hands right now, I must not let her go just like that. I could not accept what she said.

I summoned Siegfried again and aimed it at the debris blocking my way.

This was only instinct. If the physical obstructions could not be cleared and my voice could not reach her... *All I had to do was use a power unfettered by physical laws*!

"Ether Bullet!!"

What I unleashed was the power inherited from "Yellow" Hraesvelgr. Golden particles for materializing one's spirit—the soul.

Applied to living beings in high enough density, it could even seal their movements... But my generating capacity was nowhere near enough on my own.

Hence, the purpose of this was not to stop Ariella in her tracks.

Unfettered by physical laws, these particles could pass through sand and soil—Possibly reaching her. My voice might actually reach her.

There was no concrete evidence, just an ambiguous possibility. However, I yelled as hard as I could, entrusting my message to that sliver of hope.

"Even if you change, you will always be Ariella! I will never give up on you!!"

My voice echoed inside the cavern, causing ripples in the golden particles filling the surroundings.

"——!"

Then it came back. Ariella's thoughts. The feelings she could not voice.

It was no illusion. Her emotions had definitely reached my heart.

Dancing like snowflakes, the golden particles gradually thinned out and disappeared.

—Yes, I know.

Watching the debris and the wall of rock, I tightly clenched my left hand with its glowing dragon mark, responding to her thoughts in my mind.

Epilogue

Waves were lapping against a white beach.

As part of the landing party arriving at Midgard on small boats, Sleipnir was waiting here for their collaborator to converge.

All the other units had set off to subjugate the Academy's various facilities.

One member of the team, Kunato Ktinos, looked up at the clock tower beyond the tropical forest and wiped sweat off his brow.

Did his other teammates not mind the summer heat? With robotic and emotionless expressions, they were quietly patrolling the vicinity.

How eerie, but he feared that his own expression probably resembled theirs too.

Mist shrouded his mind, putting his consciousness in a daze. Only particularly sharp when it came to matters related to combat or the mission, yet exceptionally sluggish in emotions.

Harboring a premonition that he would even lose the ability to have such thoughts, he pondered about the person they were about to meet.

Major Loki had called this person the last piece of the puzzle for Sleipnir.

But to be honest, Kunato found it difficult to imagine someone whose talents could rival Mononobe Yuu and John Hortensia.

At the current stage, the newcomer should be excluded if he or she would compromise Sleipnir's level of completion.

Kunato thought this matter-of-factly.

He had not realized that this thought itself was already abnormal.

However, the moment he noticed the aura of the person approaching them, he knew that his worries were redundant.

Walking along the beach, the sound of her footsteps made Kunato's spine tremble.

That sharp gaze made his breathing difficult.

"She" was exuding acute killing intent from her entire body, inspiring him with fear.

"Ah, so you guys are Sleipnir. I see now. Good enough to serve as limbs."

The one who appeared before him was a tomboyish girl.

Dressed in Midgard Academy's uniform, she was looking at the members of Sleipnir with an appraising gaze.

The instant that gaze looked at him, Kunato could already sense his heart submitting to her.

Despite her lofty attitude, he did not feel offended.

She was simply speaking what was matter-of-fact.

They had come here to act as her limbs. Kunato believed without hesitation.

"—Here."

Kunato took a step forward and gave her the red capsule that Major Loki had handed to him.

"Thanks."

She thanked Kunato and stared at the capsule.

Sharp as a blade, her aura and expression was shaken for merely an instant. It looked like she was slightly hesitant.

"—Sorry, Mononobe-kun."

But after a murmur, as though to firm up her willpower, she swallowed the capsule.

In that instant, Kunato felt as though his consciousness and senses had expanded dramatically. He became cognizant of what were blindspots to himself. This was probably what the other teammates could see. Understanding that their senses were now shared, Kunato trembled at this feeling of omnipotence. Right now, Sleipnir was definitely complete as a "collective."

"Well then, let's move out."

The girl started walking. Kunato and the others followed silently.

Limbs did not speak. Sharing everything, absolute obedience requiring neither questioning nor confirmation.

Next, the monster, consisting of eight merged as one, moved on the offensive.

Towards the clock tower where "Gray" was waiting—

*

"Okay, let's go—Everyone."

I announced, looking back and forth across the girls who had gathered in the living room of the cottage in the cavern.

I had told them everything. What Ariella had been hiding, what her "heart" was seeking.

Then I asked for their help. For the sake of what I had to do next.

"Yeah. Do your best, Mononobe!"

Iris clenched her fist and nodded.

"Yes. All of us together, Nii-san."

Although her body had not fully recovered, Mitsuki answered with fierce determination in her eyes.

"I was fully prepared a long time ago."

Lisa tossed her long blonde hair and said impatiently.

"Me too, no problem."

Firill answered with a thumbs-up.

"Tia too!"

Having regained her former vitality, Tia jumped around and said loudly.

"Oh well, the enemy might already know about this place. Staying here is definitely not an option."

Kili looked unmotivated, but she agreed without objections.

"Hmm... Suit yourselves. If ye have need of my power, feel free to release these bonds any time, understood?"

Even less motivated than Kili, Vritra pointed at the vine tied around her neck.

"Captain, you can leave Shion in my care."

Hugging Shion's shoulders, Jeanne said solemnly.

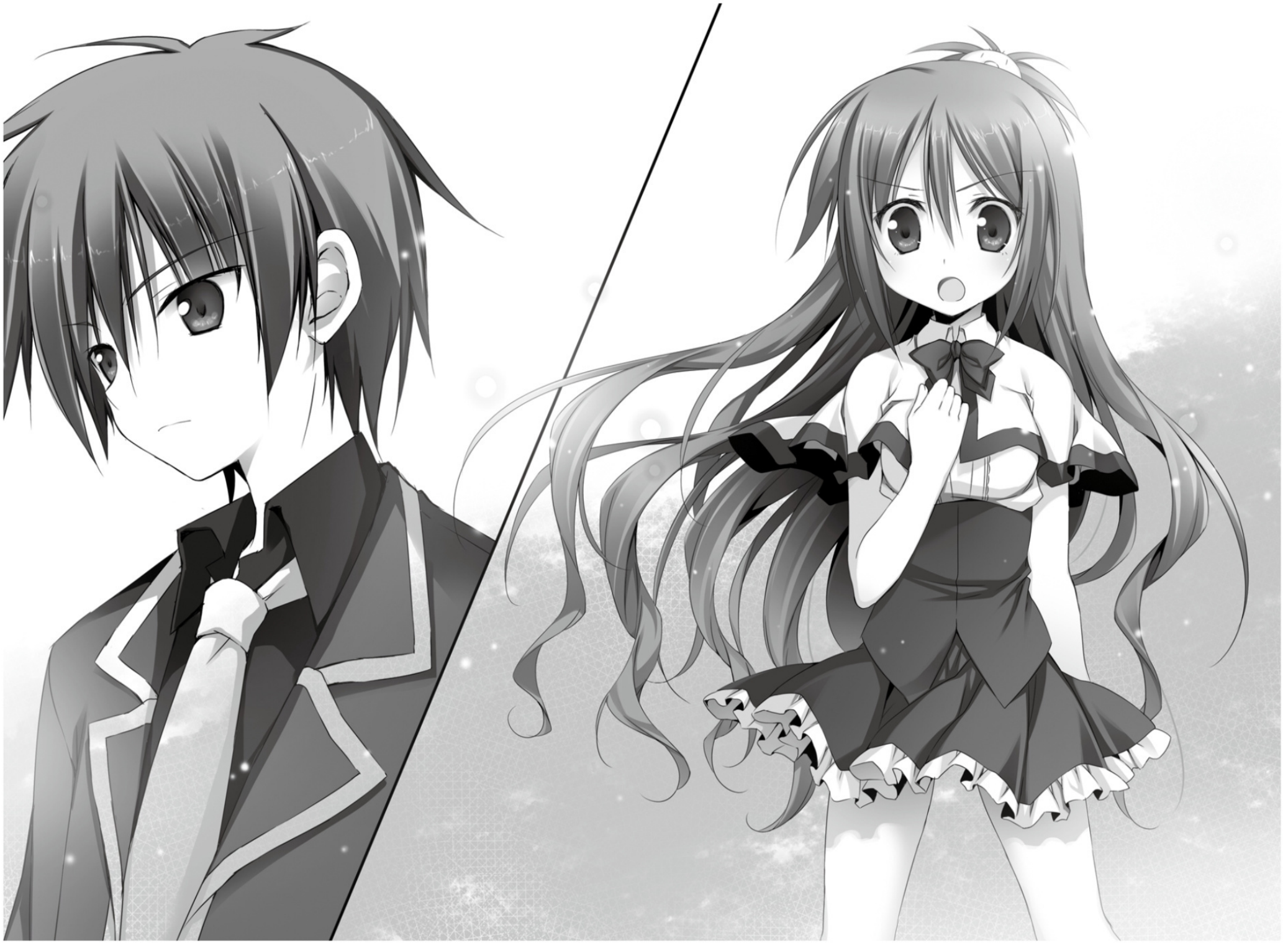
"Papa... dO yOur beSt."

Murmuring in a feeble voice, Shion encouraged me.

Finally, all eyes gathered on Ren.

Ren took a deep breath and showed strong determination on her face.

"Mm. Let's go, Onii-chan. To find Ariella... Onee-chan—And *rescue her*."



Afterword

This is Tsukasa. Thank you very much for holding Unlimited Fafnir Volume 9, Cerulean Engage, in your hand right now!

As you can probably tell from reading the main plot, this volume is the first half of a major episode.

I really wanted to keep everything tightly wrapped up in one volume, but there were many depictions and things I had to write about, so this sort of structure resulted.

The first half was slice-of-life—It wouldn't be wrong to say that it wandered a little and battle scenes were minimal.

And for some reason, "hot spring" scenes account for the majority of the volume.

Given the density of hot spring scenes, it'd be better to call this the hot spring volume than a hot spring occasion. It's my first time writing an episode of nothing but bath scenes. With all that blood rushing up his head, I seriously worry for Yuu's health.

Truth be told, when the Unlimited Fafnir series first started, my intention was to put in one bath scene per volume.

But after putting all my strength into writing the hot spring scene in Volume 3, there was an interruption in bath scenes for four volumes until Volume 7.

However, with the number of bath scenes in this volume, I've made up for the deficiency all at once. If you calculate the ratio of bath scenes to volumes, you can see a trend shooting at 100% with super momentum. A bath scene ratio of 120%—People will probably no longer be able to tell what this novel is about.

Speaking of which, although it's a completey separate matter, the other day I visited a hot spring for the first time in roughly ten years.

I was greeted by very refined and efficient systems with a rich variation of baths. Hot springs are surely evolving... Just so that I'm not left behind by the times, I'd like to depict an evolved bath scene. However, as much as I saved this volume, due to the momentum of the plot in the current episode, there might not be any room left in the next volume for bath scenes...

And now for acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, thank you very much for your splendid illustrations again this time!

Bath scene illustrations are the best, of course, the frontispieces of Kili and Ariella are wonderful too. I especially love the depiction of Kili in high spirits.

Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, I really appreciate your support in all areas in addition to the novel, such as various anime-related maters.

Every volume, I secretly look forward to the synopsis Shouji-sama writes for the back cover, always impressing me with the intensity and fervor of his phrasing. I am honored to continue working with you.

Next, this is my first opportunity to write an afterword after the anime finished broadcasting (although the previous volume was released after the anime ended, the afterword was written before that), so allow me to express my gratitude here.

Everyone involved in the anime, I am so glad to see Yuu and all the others speaking and moving. Getting to work with so many great people really motivates me to try my best.

Then finally, my heartfelt thanks to all the readers and watchers of the anime.

Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, May 2015

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき

担当さんが今回は
アリエラちゃんが
大変なことに
なりますと言って
いたのでどんな
エロが期待
していた自分が
いました。(耳心)

木緒りこ
枝のこ

宣伝～(C88)
8月のコミケで
同人ゲーム.
「箱庭の学園」が発売します。
こちらもよろしくでーす。全年齢のサスペンスです。

According to the editor, Ariella-chan is expected to be in trouble. Look forward to lots of ero. (embarrassed)

Korie Riko

Advertising time~

Doujin game "UN JARDIN MINIATURE" will be sold at the Comiket this August (C88).

Please show your support for this all-age story of suspense.